DEVILISH
PARK AVENUE KINGS
USA TODAY BESTSELLING AUTHORS
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DEVILISH

PARK AVENUE KINGS

BOOK TWO

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Thank You
Special Thanks
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SYNOPSIS

In a world where everything is within his grasp, love is the only thing that's ever eluded him.

Lucien Vale is temptation incarnate. Devilishly charming, wickedly confident, and sinfully sexy, he rules Manhattan's most elite clubs, indulging the city's darkest desires with a knowing smirk and a whisper of seduction. He's built an empire, played the game to perfection, and isn't afraid to get his hands dirty when it serves the greater good.

But love? That's always been just out of reach.
Then he sees Kai Daniels—a man too raw, too vulnerable, and too damn captivating to ignore—being used by someone who doesn't deserve him. And Lucien doesn't hesitate. He steps in, knowing full well that some things aren't meant to be owned.

But Kai's past isn't ready to let him go. His tormentor is powerful, relentless, and determined to make them both pay. As the stakes rise, Lucien is forced to become the man he's kept buried—the one who doesn't just play the game but makes sure his enemies never play again.
Now, with danger closing in and their connection burning hotter than ever, Lucien and Kai must decide if they're willing to risk everything for a love that was never part of the plan.

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1

LUCIEN

THE VEIL WAS my fortress, and I was its king.

Its devilish king.

From my black-and-gold throne high above the private club, I watched over the sinful scenes taking place, the many naked, leather-clad, and rope-bound bodies, and felt a supreme satisfaction.

This was my gift, my contribution to the pleasure-seeking members of society: giving an indulgent, safe place to explore their fantasies and kinks, a place without judgment or fear. A place where sex reigned…and so did I.

"We're at capacity." Standing tall and formidable beside me, Malcolm scanned over every inch of the den. "New faces."

I followed my manager's gaze, locking on the two unfamiliar men who'd just arrived. Though I didn't know either by name—yet—they would've had to pay a handsome sum to even be considered for entrance, with another member vouching for them.

Cocking my head, I studied the elder gentleman blocking his smaller companion as they walked farther into the club. Something about him made the hair at the nape of my neck prickle. Maybe it was the ruddy color of his skin, or the lecherous way he stared, licking his thin lips as he stopped at each scene.

"Name?" I said to Malcolm.

"Rupert McGuire. Head of the Manhattan Contemporary Gallery."

"Hmm." I ran a finger over my lips as the shorter of the two came into view. Well, shorter was an understatement, because though he had the face

of a beautiful man, he was so slight in build that most of the guys in the room towered over him.

In complete contrast to his partner, this one didn't openly stare at anyone, instead peeking at them almost shyly, like he didn't think he was allowed to.

Did he belong to Rupert? It was possible, though he didn't wear a collar and wasn't holding Rupert's hand or touching him in any way. Age-gap pairings weren't anything unusual here. Neither were rich men with young playthings. Every relationship was different, something that was welcomed and even celebrated here.

Still, something about Rupert chafed, and being in the business of reading body language meant I wasn't usually wrong about a red flag.

"Keep an eye on them," I told Malcolm, who nodded once before quietly disappearing into the shadows of the club.

What I didn't say was that he'd be providing the second set of eyes, because I didn't plan to take mine off them.

Rupert stopped beside Zayne, one of the most revered doms to guest-showcase at The Veil, and watched as he made the complicated shibari techniques he was doing on his restrained partner look easy. Beautiful knots of bright red rope covered the sub's body, making it not only a work of art, but a powerful experience for the one underneath Zayne's skilled hands.

It didn't escape my notice the way Rupert's companion reacted to what he was seeing. Eyes wide, full lips parted. Clearly he wasn't familiar with this style of bondage, and when Rupert said something to him, he shook his head.

Why, then, did Rupert roll his eyes, grab hold of his companion's cropped shirt, drag him to the only empty spot in the club, and leave him there while he ran off to procure accessories for the evening?

I narrowed my eyes, and as if he could feel my stare, the one left behind looked up at me.

God, he was pretty. Even under the dark lighting made to set the mood, I could see the auburn in his short, wavy hair. He had stronger features than I'd expected from one so small, with a sharp jaw and full lips made for sucking…and biting. Very all-American. *Very* enticing.

Very…not mine.

He swallowed hard as our eyes remained locked on each other. My fingers curled into the arms of the chair and my dick throbbed with an ache

I was suddenly desperate to relieve. But as if the universe knew I was about to break one of my own rules, Rupert reappeared carrying a coil of red rope. A glaring reminder that the object of my desire was well and truly taken.

Frustration clawed at me as Rupert stopped in front of his date, blocking my view, and I ordered my cock to calm the hell down. No matter how pretty someone was, I wasn't the kind of man to steal another's possessions. Especially in my own club. If word got around I was willing to poach another man's companion for myself, that wouldn't be too good for business, now would it?

Resigned to the fact I wouldn't be dipping my dick in the one thing it truly wanted this evening, I got to my feet and made a decision. Just because I couldn't touch, didn't mean I couldn't look. Plus, I still wasn't one hundred percent convinced that what was happening between the two that'd caught my attention was on the up-and-up.

I scanned the open space full of secrets and sin as I started forward through the crowd. The music throbbing out of the speakers was a pulse-pounding beat that made the blood pump through your veins almost as hard as the deeds going on around you and the orders being given and followed in different corners of the club. Some might see this as a den of iniquity, but for me it was a place of acceptance, self-expression, lust, and often love. Even if just for the night.

Anything goes, that was my motto—as long as it was consensual.

Something I was starting to suspect wasn't the case between the two I was closing in on.

From my position I could see that Rupert had shoved his partner down to his knees in front of him. He was shaking the bundle of rope at him, as the pretty one adamantly shook his head. Not exactly the kind of response a willing participant in a scene would give, unless of course he was playing the role of brat. However, judging by the flash of fear that entered his wide eyes when Rupert leaned down and hissed something between his teeth, my gut told me this was no role playing but true panic.

Picking up my pace, I strode toward them, blood ringing in my ears as the man on his knees reluctantly reached for the edge of his cropped shirt and pulled it up over his head. He didn't want this, that was blatantly obvious as he clutched the material over his leather-clad knees in a final act of defiance.

Rupert leaned down and snatched the shirt out of his hands, tossing it to the floor. Then he walked around behind him and said, “Give me your hands.”

The young man swallowed, his Adam’s apple bobbing as he slowly put his arms behind his back. Rupert crouched down and yanked them together hard, making his companion wince, and just as he started to wrap the red rope around the man’s upper arms in a careless, unpracticed way, I stepped off the main floor and into the space he’d commandeered.

The one on his knees raised his head, and fucking hell… If I’d thought he was pretty from across the club, up close he was absolutely devastating. If he’d been down on his knees for me I would’ve treated him like the most exquisite diamond I’d ever had the pleasure of looking at. Not manhandled him like some overbearing thug who didn’t know what a priceless gem he had before him.

Holding his eyes and giving no regard to Rupert, who hadn’t even noticed my presence, I asked, “Safe word?”

A wrinkle of confusion between his brows confirmed what I already knew.

Rupert glanced over his shoulder, looked me up and down, and, with a quick “no thanks,” went back to wrapping the rope around the beautiful man’s chest in a way that made me cringe.

But if he thought he could dismiss me so easily, he had another thing coming.

“Safe word,” I said again in a tone that brooked no argument, and this time Rupert shot to his feet to face me.

“Look, pal, we’re not interested. Beat it.”

A slow smile spread across my mouth. This was going to be especially gratifying.

“I don’t believe we’ve met,” I said, glancing back at the one on his knees to make sure the clumsy rope work wasn’t causing him pain. “Lucien Vale. I’m the owner of this club.”

Surprise flitted across Rupert’s face, and he tossed the rope he held over his companion’s lap haphazardly before holding out his hand.

Welcoming him into the fold? *I think not.*

“Are you aware of the safety procedures here at The Veil?” I said.

Rupert dropped his hand and straightened his shoulders, but he was still several inches shorter than my six-foot-two.

“Sure, sure.” He waved me off. “I signed the paperwork.”

“You must have to be allowed entrance into my private club, or any of the ones I own around the world.”

“Is there a problem here?” he said before gesturing to his bound companion, whose gaze kept flicking between the two of us. “Or can I get back to what I came for?”

“What you *both* came for,” I corrected him.

“Right. Sure.”

Then Rupert made the mistake of turning his back on me, and before he could make another move, I clamped my hand down on his shoulder.

“What the—”

I turned to the one on his knees and demanded, “Safe word.”

He bit the inside of his cheek and looked to Rupert, who opened his mouth to speak, but I held my hand up.

“Not you.” I nodded toward the beautiful bound one. “Him.”

Those full lips parted and then he shook his head.

“You don’t know what that is, do you?”

Again, he glanced at Rupert and shook his head.

Fury licked at my veins. “You tied this man up without a safe word?”

“He’s fine. If he didn’t like it, he would say—”

“His. Safe. Word.”

Rupert’s jaw clenched. “Fine. It’s—”

“No.” Several feet away, Malcolm watched and waited for my signal, and when I gave it, he was at my side in an instant. “Malcolm, would you escort Mr. McGuire from the premises and make sure he’s banned from entering any of my establishments in the future?”

Rupert blanched and then his face went fire-engine red. “On what grounds? I’m a paid member—”

“*Were* a paid member. One who’s no longer welcome.” I stepped toward him so that he had to crane his neck to look up at me. “Everything at The Veil is consensual and everyone follows the strict rules set out in the paperwork you signed. That means using a *safe* word when engaging in any kind of bondage play, something your partner knows nothing about.”

“He’s—”

“No longer any concern of yours.”

“Excuse me?”

“You heard me. The second you violated his trust in my space, he became *my* concern.”

Rupert began to sputter before shaking his head in disbelief. “You can’t just kick me out.”

“Oh, but I can.” I gestured to Malcolm, who moved up beside Rupert and took a firm grip of his bicep. “And no, you can’t get a refund.”

Rupert’s eyes darted to the man still on his knees, and I moved in front of him, blocking his view.

Rupert’s attention flicked back to me. “You can’t just take him.”

“I can do whatever the fuck I like. But to be clear, I’m not *taking* him. I’m saving him—from you. Malcolm?”

Without another word, Malcolm began to tow Rupert away from the corner and through the crowd toward the door. Not caring what happened to him beyond that, I turned back to the one on his knees, who was staring out into the sea of people as though watching his boat sail off into the distance.

Not wanting to startle him, I slowly held my hand out, and those big eyes peered up at me under the light. Not quite grey and not quite blue, his eyes were an unusual shade that reminded me of a misty morning as the sun tried to peek through. But it was the expression in them that had my breath catching.

Where I thought I’d see relief, all I saw was worry and confusion. I’d taken away the one person he was most familiar with, and monster or not, Rupert was who he knew—and I was nothing but a stranger.

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2

KAI

NO. WHAT'S HAPPENING? Where are they taking him?

Panic, sharp as a knife, seared my chest as the man in black, the one who'd introduced himself to Rupert as Lucien Vale, held his hand out toward me.

I looked back at where Rupert was being thrown out and rose to my knees, needing to go after him, but I was tangled in the rope he'd been eager to tie around me. Fear clawed at me as I struggled to break free, but somehow the rope was getting even tighter.

Oh God, don't leave.

But I couldn't even see Rupert now. He was gone, and he'd left me here all alone, without a place to go. My breath hitched, and I swallowed down the whimper of dread I felt as the realization hit that I was fucked. So fucked.

"Hey." Lucien's voice softened as he crouched down in front of me. The rope chafed against my skin as I tried to get free, but when Lucien reached for me, I jerked back.

He held his hands up, and dark, penetrating eyes searched mine. There was something almost hypnotizing about them, and I found myself going still, even though I was breathing so hard I was getting lightheaded.

"I won't hurt you," he said, keeping his distance, hands still up where I could see them. "Let me get you out of this mess. All right?"

I swallowed hard but couldn't get any words out. Not when I was starting to see two of his face and the edges of my vision were turning

green.

"You need to breathe or you'll pass out," he said. "Can I help you?"

When I managed to nod, he didn't waste any time. The rope disappeared in a matter of seconds, making it easier for me to catch my breath.

"Good boy," Lucien murmured, handing me my shirt before lifting me to my feet.

As the dizziness passed, I realized I was holding on to him for dear life, my fingers curled into his arms like I was begging him not to leave me.

Maybe I was.

He didn't try to pull away or pry me off him, just watched me carefully. "I'm going to take you to my office. You're safe now."

I was safe now? What did he know about my life? He couldn't make those promises, and I'd never believe them anyway.

But Rupert was gone. I had to go somewhere.

I nodded, and a few minutes later, we entered a room that didn't look anything like an office but like an extension of the club, with plush chairs and loveseats and low-lit lamps instead of overhead lighting.

Lucien stopped just inside, dropping his hands from me and waiting until he was sure I wouldn't fall over before gesturing toward a dark velvet loveseat in the center of the room.

My breathing may have finally been under control, but my pulse raced.

Who was this guy? Why was I here? What did he want from me?

When I didn't take a seat, Lucien took a couple of water bottles out of a mini fridge and set one on the table by the loveseat. Then he twisted the cap off the other and took a long swallow, and it was only then, with his attention elsewhere, that I really looked at him.

Lucien's coal-colored hair and piercing, dark stare added an air of mystery to him that was as alarming as it was intriguing, as he slipped in and out of the shadows of his office as though they were an extension of his physical being.

He wandered over to the loveseat and took a seat at one end, and the position immediately eased some of the tension thrumming through me. His towering height was definitely intimidating, but the fact he was aware of it and had taken it out of the equation was shocking. Rupert never did anything to put me at ease.

"I didn't catch your name out there," Lucien said, leaning back into the seat and crossing one leg over the other. He looked casual, relaxed, and was

more than likely trying to make me feel the same way. But considering he'd just kicked my ride out of his club, I wasn't relaxing anytime soon.

Rupert would be furious when I finally returned home.

"Your name?" he pressed as I stood there silently, trying to work out just how much trouble I was going to be in.

"Kai," I said softly, my eyes on the floor as I tried my best to think up an excuse Rupert would accept.

"Kai," Lucien said. "That's a pretty name. Do you know its origins?"

I brought my eyes up and stared at him, wondering if I'd heard him right.

"In Hawaiian it means sea. Japanese it means shell or ocean. Oh, and this is an interesting one, it means king in Persian—"

"I don't know," I said, wondering how *he* did, considering we'd just met. "It's just a name."

"Hmm. Perhaps. But I've always found the history or origins of them fascinating, and yours is not particularly common around here."

"And Lucien is?" I hadn't meant to say that out loud, but when his lips curved into a grin, I could tell he wasn't bothered by my response.

"No, I don't suppose it is. Lucien is of French origin and means light. Same in Latin—it's derived from lux, which means light."

I frowned and looked around the shadow-filled space, and Lucien chuckled.

"Ironic, right? Please, won't you take a seat?"

I looked over my shoulder to the door, then back to the man on the loveseat, and thought about making a run for it, but I wasn't even sure Rupert would be outside waiting for me. I didn't have any money and no means to get home. Maybe if I sat down and answered whatever questions this Lucien guy had, he'd put me in a taxi and send me on my way.

I walked to the opposite end of the loveseat and gingerly sat, still not sure what he wanted from me. This wasn't the first time I'd been alone in a room with a powerful man. But at least I knew what to expect in those situations.

"I want to ask you a couple of questions, if that's okay with you?"

I nodded and chewed on my lower lip, waiting for the hammer to fall. This guy was being too considerate, too nice to someone like me.

"That man you came here with tonight, Rupert. Is he your boyfriend?"

I scrunched up my nose.

“Okay, okay, no. How about partner?”

I shook my head.

“Daddy?”

I shook it again. “Keeper.”

Lucien’s eyes narrowed and hardened, and it felt as though the temperature in the room dropped several degrees. I immediately lowered my eyes to my lap.

Why did I say that?

“What do you mean by ‘keeper’?”

When I didn’t respond, Lucien shifted in his seat and leaned forward, gently touching my knee. I raised my eyes to his.

“What do you mean?”

“I… I just meant he gives me somewhere to sleep and eat.” *Shut up,* I silently berated myself, knowing that if Rupert was waiting for me I’d be in even deeper trouble if he knew what I’d just said.

“So you live together.”

I nodded, keeping my mouth shut this time.

“Do you feel safe there?”

Not about to lie, I said nothing.

“Hey,” Lucien said. “You can talk to me. I’m not going to tell him.”

He might not tell Rupert anything, but the fact he’d gotten rid of him already meant my living situation had been jeopardized.

Lucien sighed. “Do you have anywhere else you can go? Perhaps with a friend or—”

“No, no, no.” I shook my head and covered my face as pinpricks stung my eyes. *Oh God.* What was I going to do? I’d end up on the streets, a place I’d told myself I’d never go back to.

I rocked back and forth, my mind racing as I tried to come up with a plan. It wasn’t like this guy could stop me from going home. Sure, Rupert would be so pissed he may not even answer the door, but he wouldn’t keep me out forever…right? This wasn’t my fault.

“Kai. Look at me.”

I couldn’t do that. He’d see right through me.

“Kai, I know you’re scared, but I know men like Rupert. Power-hungry pieces of shit, that’s all they are.”

My head shot up.

“Yeah.” Lucien nodded, brushing the back of his finger across my cheek. It came away wet, but I didn’t have the energy to be mortified, not when there were so many other emotions coursing through me. “I don’t know your story, don’t know your relationship with him, but I can see you, and that’s no way to live. If you don’t have anywhere to go, you can stay here. I’ve got a room you can have—”

He didn’t even get the rest of his sentence out before I shot to my feet, shaking my head. No way was I staying here. I wasn’t going to work in some sex club. I’d rather sleep on the steps of Rupert’s brownstone.

Before I could reach for the door handle, Lucien blocked my exit. “You don’t like that idea?”

“I’m not going to work in a sex club.”

“Wait a second,” he said. “I don’t want you to work here. I was offering you somewhere safe to stay. But I can understand why this might not work for you. I have another idea, but it requires some trust.”

He extended his hand. “I’m Lucien Vale. I’m thirty-six, though I won’t blame you if you thought I was thirty-three. It’s the genes.” He winked at me, and it was so not what I expected that I could only blink and stare.

Lucien nodded at his hand. “You gonna leave me hanging, or…?”

I didn’t know why I did it, but I shook his hand. His fingers engulfed mine easily, warm and strong and…comforting.

“I’m Kai Daniels,” I said, and then bit the inside of my cheek. “I’m twenty-three.”

“And look eighteen,” Lucien teased. “Are you sure you’re twenty-three?”

I nodded. “It’s the genes.”

His low chuckle was genuine, so effortless that I almost cracked a smile.

He had a deep laugh. It was…nice.

“Well, Kai,” he said, and lowered my hand. “I was wrapping things up here for the night to head home soon anyway, so since you need somewhere to stay and I have a spare room, why don’t you come home with me tonight?”

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3

LUCIEN

KAI DIDN'T MOVE from where he stood in the corner of the elevator as it whisked us up to my apartment. He'd stayed quiet on the drive over, was quiet still now, and I had a feeling he was second-guessing his decision to come with me.

I wouldn't take offense at that. His hesitancy had less to do with me and more to do with the situation he found himself in. There was a lot I could infer about his relationship with Rupert, and none of it was good. Which meant the best thing I could offer him right now was a safe place to lay his head tonight without worry.

The doors opened, and I gestured for Kai to exit first. He took a deep breath and then walked out, and I had to hand it to him—he put up a brave front. No telling what he'd been through, but those were questions for another time.

There were only two residences on this floor—mine and one belonging to an Australian billionaire who preferred to spend her time in Sydney Harbour, so I always had the utmost privacy in the place I considered my sanctuary. Though, truth be told, if she ever came back, I'd work my charm to buy her out.

"No one will bother you here," I said, unlocking the door. "All the crazy neighbors flew south for the spring."

Kai didn't seem to even hear what I'd said, too busy staring wide-eyed at my house.

I supposed it *was* a little extra, but then, so was I.

“You can come in. I won’t bite.” *Unless you ask me to.*

With tentative steps, he walked inside, eyes roaming over every inch of the place.

Curious, I tried to take an objective look at what he was seeing.

I’d designed a dark, hedonistic paradise, rich and luxurious in shades of black, red, and purple. Exquisite chandeliers were set to a dim light that always captured the mood, above imported furniture and antiques of the highest quality, made with the most sumptuous leather and velvet. Against the backdrop of cathedral windows overlooking Manhattan, an ornate staircase led to the second floor.

Kai’s gaze stopped on one of the many ancient artifacts I’d collected over the years, this one proudly displayed on the wall.

“Incredible, isn’t it?” I said.

“Is that a…”

“Jade and bronze butt plug from over two thousand years ago? It is.” I reached for the display box and brought it down to Kai for a closer look. “Now, when we look at something like this, we automatically think it’s for pleasure. At least, I do.” I winked at him. “But this was found in the tomb of a king in China, and the lore is that the dead would be buried with butt plugs to seal in the body’s life energy.”

Kai’s brows shot up, and I chuckled as I put the box back on its perch.

“I know. What a waste.”

I stepped farther into the large, open space, giving Kai some room to breathe, but when I turned back to see him still staring at the artifact on the wall, my lips quirked.

Curiosity was always a good way to coax out a skittish kitty, and giving Kai something to focus on other than me was the perfect distraction for this scaredy cat.

“Are you hungry? Thirsty?” I asked as I shrugged out of my coat and tossed it over the end of one of the wide velvet couches.

Kai glanced over his shoulder, his eyes drifting past me to the ornate fireplace with its detailed mantel of black marble. The intricate design carved into the overmantel drew the eye all the way up to the twenty-five-foot ceiling and was as over the top as the rest of the place.

“Kai?”

He dragged his attention away from the hearth and back to me.

“Food? Something to drink? Can I fix you anything?” I had no clue if he was hungry, but judging by his slight frame, he could do with a good meal or three.

“No, I’m, uh, I’m fine.”

“Please, let me fix you something.”

He shrugged and shoved his hands into his pockets. “Okay.”

“Good.” I smiled at the small victory and gestured to the seating area. “Have a seat wherever you like. I’ll be right back.”

I hurried off to the kitchen, not sure whether Kai would actually stay, but willing to bet he wouldn’t mind something to at least drink after the night he’d had.

Not wanting to leave him alone for too long, I didn’t linger as I threw together a couple of roast beef sandwiches, grabbed two bags of chips, and then stared a little too long at my choice of beverages.

If it had been anyone but Kai sitting out in my living area I would’ve offered up a stiff drink, thinking that was exactly what he needed. But considering the way the evening had gone, I wasn’t sure alcohol was the right direction to go in.

Instead, I reached for a bottle of water and headed back to where I’d left him, food in hand. Just as I’d suspected, he hadn’t cut and run. He’d taken a spot at the far end of the velvet couch, and with as wide as the seat cushion was, and tiny as Kai was, the piece all but swallowed him.

“Would you like the ottoman?” I asked, gesturing to the tufted foot stall at the end of the couch. “Or you can tuck your feet up. I didn’t even think about it, but it can’t be comfortable for your legs to dangle like that.”

Kai looked down at his feet and then back to me. “I’m used to it.”

I shoved the ottoman toward him with my foot, and then put the tray of food down on top of it. “Well, just in case.”

I took my plate and water and moved to the enormous leather chair that sat opposite the couch. It could fit two people comfortably but was also perfect for me to sit by the fireplace and read a good book or three.

Kai glanced down at his plate and picked up one half of his sandwich.

“It’s roast beef.” I frowned. “You’re not a vegetarian, are you?”

Kai said nothing, just took a bite of the sandwich.

“*Not* a vegetarian—good to know.”

He must’ve been hungrier than he’d let on, though, because after that he demolished everything on his plate without another glance my way. My

instincts had been proven right, that though he might've had a place to sleep and eat with Rupert, he sure as hell hadn't been eating a whole lot.

My anger at the situation I'd found Kai in clawed its way back to the surface as I quietly watched him from across the room.

How had he come to be with someone like Rupert? Why did he stay?

He'd mentioned that Rupert was his "keeper." *Like a fucking zoo animal?* The idea made everything inside me rage.

I didn't know this young man. But from the second I saw Rupert manhandle him like a piece of property, every protective instinct I had had fired.

I had no time for bullies. No patience for thugs. And it appeared that Rupert McGuire was both, if not a whole lot worse. That was something I planned to look into as soon as I got the chance. I wanted to know who had vouched for him. How he'd gained access to my club. Something I'd be extremely pissed about if it hadn't led to my being able to help Kai out of the situation he'd found himself in.

As it was, I couldn't be too annoyed, since I'd at least be able to provide him with somewhere safe for the night.

I finished off my drink and then looked over at the empty plate Kai had put back on the tray. "Would you like another?"

He shook his head. "No. Thank you."

"You're very welcome. If you change your mind, help yourself to anything in the kitchen."

Kai's brow furrowed and he dropped his eyes to his lap, where he fidgeted like he didn't know what to do now. He wasn't going to be relaxing anytime soon, that was for sure, not when he still didn't trust my intentions.

Was he beautiful? Absolutely. Even the anxiety written all over him couldn't take away from that.

But in this moment, I wished there was something more I could do for him, and I soon realized that meant giving him some space.

"Come," I said, rising to my feet. "I'll show you to your room."

He followed me to the one a few doors down from mine. He would be overwhelmed by the others, the ones with custom-built California kings. Instead, I showed him to the one with a comfortable queen mattress, and before he stepped inside, he touched the vintage doorknob.

My jaw worked as I watched him swallow and drop his hand. He wasn't admiring the craftsmanship. He was checking for the exterior lock.

Breathe, I told myself. *Don't be tempted to murder that asshole.*

"There's a private en suite through here," I said. "I'll go find some more comfortable clothes for you, but I can't promise they'll fit well. We'll find something more suitable tomorrow if you'd like."

I quickly went through my closet for anything Kai wouldn't drown in, and when I returned, he was still standing in the same spot I'd left him, slender arms hugging himself, still in that cropped mesh shirt that didn't cover much.

I placed the clothes on the end of the bed and offered what I hoped was a comforting smile. "My room is the last one down the hall. If you need anything, let me know."

He nodded, and that was my cue to leave. But as my fingers grazed the knob, I turned back to look at him.

"By the way, the doors lock from the inside here. Not the outside."

When Kai's head shot up, I tapped the lock twice and then slipped out of the room, hoping he'd be able to find some semblance of peace tonight.

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4

KAI

I STARED AFTER Lucien long after he was gone, and the silence that filled the room was deafening. He didn't shut the door. Didn't lock me in. But I still felt the penetrating isolation to my bones.

What am I doing here? Why is he bothering with me?

I was doing just fine without his interference, and now what? He'd played hero and rescued me for a night, only to fuck things up with the one person and the one place I'd finally found for myself. He kept saying this was a safe place, but that only accounted for the time I was here. He didn't know me. Didn't know my life. The guy was making promises he couldn't possibly keep.

No one ever did.

I eyed the pile of clothes on the bed and the plush throw artfully placed across the corner. My fingers ached to touch it, but the second I ran my hand over it, I realized it was a mistake. I'd been in the houses of millionaires and never felt anything so soft and warm in my life. It was like a cloud, one I could easily fall into and stay in forever, and *that* was exactly why I had to get out of there.

Jerking my hand away, I felt my insides twist again in panic. The house was so quiet, but I held my breath anyway, listening out for any sound that Lucien was awake.

Several heartbeats passed, and when it was still dead silent, I went to the door he'd left open halfway and peered out.

Nothing moved. The door at the end of the hall that Lucien said was his remained closed.

My adrenaline kicked in as I quietly stepped out of the room, keeping to the rugs to muffle the sound of my footsteps. Unlike Rupert's older home, which creaked under hardly any pressure at all, this one didn't make any noise, something that worked in my favor as I made my way to the front door.

I hadn't seen an alarm system when we entered, and I could only hope one didn't suddenly go off the second I opened the door. Even if it did, Lucien had to understand I couldn't stay here. I didn't even know him, didn't know his intentions, only that no one in the world did anything for nothing, and I wasn't sticking around to see what this decision would cost me.

The second I wrapped my hand around the knob, though, I hesitated. A part of me, the part I never let out, yearned for the comfort and safety Lucien promised, even if just for a few hours.

Promises easily made, easily broken, I thought, and opened the door, and mercifully, no alarm blared the second I stepped out.

Adrenaline coursed through me as I glanced down the hall to the elevator, my heart thundering in a chaotic rhythm.

I paused in the doorway, my fingers wrapped around the handle, knowing that when I let it go, that was it, decision made. I'd be on my own again. But the uncertainty of the man inside was the final push I needed.

I didn't know anything about Lucien Vale. But the streets? No matter how lonely or unwelcoming they might be, I knew them.

I let go of the handle and bolted toward the elevator, jamming my finger against the button over and over until the door finally slid open, then hurried inside and hit the button for the lobby. Seconds later the door reopened, and freedom was within my grasp.

I stepped out onto the polished marble of the entrance to the building, and was more than aware of how out of place I appeared in such an upscale establishment. My low-cut leather pants and skimpy top screamed *sex*, and as I walked across the empty space I was acutely conscious of the eyes following me from behind the front desk.

I wrapped my arms around my bare waist and hurried toward the door, where I didn't bother waiting for anyone to come open it like they had for

Lucien when we arrived. Hell, they were probably hoping I'd see myself out, so I did just that.

The chill of the night air was the first thing that greeted me, wrapping me in its cold, dark embrace as the door swooshed shut behind me. A shiver racked my body as I hugged myself tighter in an effort to ward off the frigid bite. But as I started down the sidewalk, the wind seemed to pick up and make it close to impossible to keep my bones from rattling.

I kept close to the buildings and hurried along, using them to block the gusts as best I could, but it seemed like nothing would help.

Damn, maybe I should've thought this through a little more. I wasn't exactly dressed for a late night stroll, especially with the weather system that had rolled in.

I stopped at a crosswalk and rubbed at my arms, waiting for the lights to change, and as the cars drew to a stop and I stepped off the curb, a fat raindrop hit the back of my neck.

You've got to be kidding me. This cannot be happening, not right now.

As I picked up my pace, the rain fell a little harder until it was pouring down over me, making the cold night turn icy.

This was great. Just *great*. Tonight was going from bad to worse with every second that passed, and as the water soaked my hair, plastering it to my face, I knew there was no way I was going to get out of this without catching pneumonia.

I had no money, no phone—I had nothing except the ridiculous clothes now sticking to my body like a second skin as the rain streamed down. I stopped under an awning and weighed my options, realizing none of them were good.

If I went back to Rupert, I'd be heavily reprimanded, even though tonight's outcome had been his doing, not mine.

If I stayed on the street, I'd likely end up sick with no way to get help. And while I'd been there before, the idea of resorting to using my body to get some kind of shelter tonight made my stomach sink.

Which left Lucien, the stranger who presented himself as a hero but was still unknown to me in any way that really counted. Would he take me back in?

Shit. Why had I left in the first place? I could've figured out a plan from a comfy bed instead of the pouring rain. But I'd done what I always did, panicked first and thought logically after the fact.

What was wrong with me that my first thought when a stranger showed kindness was to think the worst? A lifetime of fucked-up experiences, that was what.

I dropped my head back against the wall and rubbed my arms. I'd just made my situation infinitely worse, and I had nobody to blame but myself.

Well, that wasn't entirely true. Rupert had kicked things off by taking us somewhere we had no business going. That was what happened when rich men had too much money and grew bored of the usual toys. They moved on to the next thing, even if they didn't have a clue what that entailed. And Rupert didn't know the first thing about sex clubs or tying someone up. Definitely didn't know what a safe word was.

But Lucien…

There was a man with money who didn't put up with guys like Rupert. I still didn't know if he'd had an ulterior motive in bringing me back to his place, but…he had kind eyes. He didn't touch me without my permission. And he hadn't locked my door.

My stomach twisted at the thought of going back and having to beg, but as a gust of wind blew the torrential downpour sideways and the overhead awning became utterly useless, I made a snap decision.

I turned around and headed back to Lucien's building. My mind raced, trying to come up with reasons I could give the doorman for why I'd rushed out and why I'd come back. If I could just talk to Lucien and explain I'd momentarily lost my mind…

Rain pelted me in the face, and I lifted my hand in a sad attempt at blocking it. I was soaked to the bone, shivering so hard my teeth chattered, but I ran anyway, forcing my legs to keep going.

The slick handle of the door slipped out of my hand the first time I reached for it, but before I could try again, it opened.

"Not the best night for a walk, Mr. Kai," the doorman said, an amused smile on his face as he held the door open and waited for me to step inside.

The warmth of the entry had my shoulders dropping, a deep sigh leaving my body.

Wait, had he called me by my name?

"Uh…" I pushed back my soaked hair from my forehead to keep the water from dripping into my eyes. "I'm sorry, what?"

"I was just saying it's not the best weather for a stroll." He moved behind his desk and tapped a few buttons, and the elevator doors opened.

“Mr. Vale said to come on up.”

Really? Lucien knew I’d left? That I’d come back?

I stood there in shock, dripping onto the marble floor so much that a small child would be able to swim in the puddle I made.

I’d expected to have to plead to go back upstairs. To beg and apologize for running out.

The elevator doors closed and, with a few taps from the doorman, opened back up again. This time I didn’t hesitate, stepping inside before turning around to thank him as the doors slid shut.

I could see my reflection in the high-gloss interior, and “drowned rat” was an accurate epithet—hair and clothes plastered to my body, my skin pale from the cold. Hopefully Lucien wouldn’t see me like this, because I wasn’t sure I’d ever looked worse.

Nervous anticipation rolled through me as I stepped out and into the hallway that led to his “apartment”—though that word didn’t accurately describe the place. It was more like a palace, like nothing I’d ever seen before.

When I looked up, my steps faltered. Lucien waited at the entrance, one arm stretched out to hold the door open.

He didn’t look upset. Not mad or disappointed. But not surprised, either.

I swallowed and began to move again, not sure what to expect.

A small smile curved his lips as I reached him, and my chest squeezed as he said, “Welcome back. There are towels in your en suite.”

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5

LUCIEN

WITH SLEEP EVADING me for most of the night, I'd had to brew my coffee at max strength this morning. I wasn't used to having guests in my house, at least none that required a separate room, and I'd found myself listening out for movement after Kai's disappearing act.

He was free to come and go as he pleased, but the thought that he'd go back to a toxic situation bothered me.

I could already hear the advice I'd get from several of the men I called my brothers and friends. That what happened with Kai and the bastard wasn't any of my business and that I couldn't save everyone.

Maybe that was true. But I could save *him*.

With my tablet in my lap to read through the morning news, I sipped on my second cup of coffee and let my gaze drift to the closed door of Kai's room. I didn't know what it was about him that made me want—no, *need* to be there for him, but I wasn't about to overthink it.

I forced my eyes back to the screen and skimmed the top stories, letting the caffeine do its job before I had to do mine.

It wasn't long before I heard Kai's door unlocking, but I kept my attention right where it was and settled back against the leather. No need to startle or make him feel like I was waiting for him. This was my morning routine whether he was here or not, and that included lounging in my black silk robe. Clothes were made for leaving the house, but inside? Only the feel of the nicest silks against my skin would do.

Light, tentative footsteps moved in my direction, and I brought my mug to my lips, giving Kai the space to make the first move if he wished.

He stopped at the edge of the rug and cleared his throat. “Hi.”

The sight of him wearing the wine-colored silk sleep shirt and pants I’d brought him made me smile. And not just because the sleeves hung down past his fingers and he’d had to roll the waist of the pants up several times so he wouldn’t trip on them.

He’d let down his guard enough to stay the night…and to wear what I’d provided for him.

“Good morning,” I said, setting the tablet aside. “Did you sleep well?”

Kai nodded a little too quickly, and I smirked.

“Really? Because I didn’t sleep for shit.”

His brows shot up and then he bit the inside of his cheek to stop from smiling. “Me too. Your bed is really nice, though.”

“Oh?”

The red flush that crept into his cheeks was fucking adorable. “I mean, the guest bed, not *your* bed.”

He wouldn’t have gotten much sleep there either.

“I’m glad you like it.” I drained the rest of my coffee before it went lukewarm and stood up, catching the way Kai’s eyes flared when he saw what I was wearing. “How do you take your coffee? Or do you prefer tea?”

“Either,” he said. “Whatever you’re having.”

I paused, brow furrowing. “That’s not what I asked. What do *you* like?”

“I…I don’t want to be difficult.”

“If it was going to be difficult, I wouldn’t ask.” I cocked my head. “Come on, let’s see if I can’t find something to tempt you.”

I headed toward the kitchen, leaving him to join me if he wanted, and the sound of soft footfalls followed mine.

I’d just circled the center island toward the cabinets, when I heard a soft gasp, then, “Oh my God.”

I rounded back to see what the problem was and saw Kai had come to a dead stop at the entryway, his eyes as big as saucers.

“You have a *chandelier* in your kitchen.”

My eyes drifted up to the elaborate lighting fixture I’d had flown in from France. Its dark iron arms and candles complemented the black cabinetry and marble that made up the rest of the cooking space. “I do. It fit the aesthetic I was going for, adding just enough light to keep things sexy.”

“In the kitchen?”

I chuckled as I headed for the cabinet above one of the counters. “In every space. No one wants glaring lights spotlighting every flaw, whether it be in the bedroom or the kitchen. Wouldn’t you agree?”

I waited for Kai to respond, but when he didn’t, I glanced back to see his eyes roaming down over the back of my robe. I let him look his fill, but when those pretty eyes came back up to mine, he looked away.

“Um… I…”

“Ah, there it is.” I reached for the beautiful purple-and-gold coffee and tea set I’d picked up in Turkey on one of my many visits and pulled it down, along with several small cups. I placed the tray down on the island and gestured for Kai to come closer. “Isn’t this exquisite?” I ran a finger around the gold edge of one of the cups. “Let me boil some water and show you my tea collection. It’s not too extensive, but if you’re a fan of any, we can brew you some—*or* we can have coffee. The decision is yours. Okay?”

Kai’s lips quirked a little, and he nodded.

“Good. Now where is the tea…” I hunted around a couple of cabinets and then pulled out the small tins and put them on the counter for Kai to take a look at. He was on the opposite side of the island to me, but I purposely put the tins toward my end, hoping to draw him closer.

I filled up the kettle and placed it on one of the burners before leaning back against the cabinet beside it.

Just as I’d hoped, Kai had come closer to inspect the tea.

“Anything take your fancy?”

He glanced up at me from beneath his dark lashes, and that look just about took my breath away.

“They’re all so fancy sounding.” He ran a gentle finger over the labels. “White ginger pear, Sahara apple spice, wild cinnamon chai. I usually just take mine black.”

“I can make black tea, if that’s what you want.”

Kai gnawed on his lower lip, his finger hovering over one tin in particular.

“But if there’s something you want to try—”

“The wild cinnamon chai.”

Pleased that he’d actually made a decision, I pushed off the cabinet and reached for the tin. Kai held it out to me, and when he didn’t release it, I raised a brow.

“Why are you doing this?” he asked.

“Making tea?”

Kai’s eyes narrowed and he let got of the tin.

“I want you to feel safe here, comfortable, that’s all. And the best way to make sure of that is to ask a little about you. Including what you like to drink in the morning.”

Kai nodded, but I could tell there was more on his mind. Something I needed to address sooner rather than later.

“I don’t want anything from you, if that’s what’s running through your head.” I pulled the lid off the tea. “And I don’t expect anything in return for letting you sleep here or share a meal. I want to help, that’s all. You can come and go whenever you like. You’re not a prisoner.”

“But why? You don’t even know me.”

“No, I don’t. But I don’t need to know you to know that you were in a bad situation.”

Kai crossed his arms over his chest in a defensive pose, and that was my cue to give him some space.

“Why don’t you head out to the dining table and I’ll get this finished. Did you want something to eat? Some toast? Cereal?”

“Toast would be good.”

Would you look at that—I didn’t have to pry it out of him this time.

“Anything on it? Jam? Honey—”

“Honey and butter?”

“Honey and butter it is.”

Kai nodded and headed back the way he’d came, but then stopped and turned to look at me. “Thank you.”

“It’s my pleasure. I’ll be out soon.”

Tea and toast. It was simple enough, and I was glad he didn’t protest letting me take care of it. Of him.

I toasted the bread and loaded it up with butter and honey drizzle before spreading the pieces out on another vintage tray from my collection. Then I finished the tea, making two cups for Kai to choose from. One with the chai served plain, and the other with a bit of frothed milk and honey. I had a feeling I knew which one he’d choose, but I wanted him to decide his preference.

“Oh wow,” he said softly as I carried both trays to the table and set them down in front of him.

The simple spread looked fancier than what it was with the addition of the trays and tea set, which was exactly why I'd bought them. Life needed little luxuries too, not just the big, extravagant ones.

Kai's gaze roamed over it all, like he was wondering which to start with. "You really didn't have to—"

"I wanted to."

He lifted his eyes to mine, a silent thank you in them, and then reached for one of the cups before frowning and pulling his hand back. "Which one is yours?" he asked.

"They're both for you." I nodded. "Try them."

He brought the plain tea to his lips first and took a small sip. "It's good." Then he set it down carefully and reached for the other one.

The second he tasted the milky chai, his eyes lit up, and bingo.

"I thought you might enjoy that," I said, picking up some toast.

Kai nodded, drinking even more, and I felt a deep satisfaction at his pleasure. Especially when he polished off three slices of toast and I made him another cup of tea just the way he liked it.

With the satiated look on his gorgeous face, I wished I could stay longer and ask him questions I hoped he'd answer. Unfortunately, work beckoned and I'd need to leave soon, but I wanted him to know he didn't have to run off this time. He could stay.

I'd *like* him to stay.

"I'll be gone most of the day," I said, and fished the key from the pocket of my robe before sliding it across the table. "In case you feel the need to run away again and I'm not here."

He stared at the gold skeleton key. "That's the key to…your house?" He looked up at me in confusion.

"Yes."

"I've never seen one like that before."

"I'm not sure you've noticed by now, but I'm a little…over the top. Eccentric, perhaps."

"But…"

"Yes?"

"Why would you give it to me?" Wide, grey-blue eyes met mine, and it broke my heart a little.

I leaned forward and pushed the key toward him. "Because you're welcome in my home, Kai. Take it."

His hand shook a little when he reached for the key, gripping it tight in his palm.

“Feel free to do whatever you want,” I said. “If there’s anything you need to do or anywhere you need to go. If you just want to stay here and relax. Look around. Raid the fridge. The house is yours.”

Kai’s mind was close to exploding, I could sense that, so I took that as my cue to go get ready. I came out of my room minutes later, ready to head out, and found Kai sitting exactly where I’d left him.

I picked up my wallet and phone, then scribbled my number down on a piece of paper and showed it to him.

“In case you need me for anything. This phone here”—I pointed at the antique phone on the wall—“it’s not just for looks.”

Kai nodded as I headed to the door and pulled it open. I was just about to step out when I stopped and looked back at the beautiful young man who had now moved into the center of my living room.

“Have a good day, Kai. I hope you’ll be here when I get home.”

And with that, I shut the door.

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6

KAI

I STARED DOWN at the key in my hand and traced over the “L” with my thumb. Of course Lucien wouldn’t have a regular key. That wouldn’t fit with what I’d learned of him over the last few hours.

Vintage tea sets. Chandeliers in every room. That black silk robe he wore…

I pushed that image right out of my head. Lucien was… Well, he was sexy. Even questioning his intentions didn’t make me oblivious to that fact.

I wasn’t going to let myself think about that, though. He’d been nothing but kind so far, and the last thing I wanted to do was take advantage of the situation.

He gave me a key.

Why would he do that when he didn’t even know me? What if I was a thief? He had priceless artifacts, so that was a lot of trust to give someone he’d just met. Maybe he was of the mindset he’d just buy more. Everything could be purchased for a price, and he wasn’t lacking for money.

I tucked the key into the pocket of the silk pajamas he’d given me to wear and then rolled up the sleeves. Even though the clothes were several sizes too large, they felt so good that I never wanted to take them off, and they sure as hell beat the tight, barely there outfit Rupert had forced me to wear last night.

Fuck. Rupert…

My stomach twisted, all of the slices of toast I’d eaten threatening to reappear as I wondered what would happen now. What he would do when I

saw him again. Would I be cut off completely?

Slamming my eyes shut to block out the thought, I forced myself to focus on the now and not about all the what-ifs. It was too much, too scary and overwhelming to think about right now. Deep down I knew if I had to, I could start all over. I'd done it so many times, and I could do it again.

But right now I couldn't sit here and think about Rupert. Not about how upset he probably was or what he might or might not do.

I wasn't there. I was here. Somehow, magically, in this beautiful home, wearing beautiful clothes, safe and warm and off the streets. Belly full. A key in my pocket. And the whole day to do…

Whatever I wanted.

Getting to my feet, I cleaned up the table, being extra careful with the tea set and setting the last slice of toast on a paper towel for later. Lucien had told me I could raid the fridge when I got hungry, but that felt weird to do. I was so full that I couldn't think about eating anytime soon anyway, so after I dried off the trays, I ventured back out into the main living area and then…just stood there.

After the storm last night, the skies were still grey, but it somehow fit perfectly with Lucien's place. The whole vibe inside was dark and intensely sexy. Much like the man himself.

I ran my gaze over the room, my eyes catching on the staircase that curved up to a second floor, and found myself heading toward it. He'd told me I could explore, and hopefully that meant anything off-limits was locked, because I was curious about the man who'd brought me here.

As I headed up the stairs, I slid my hand along the banister and looked out the cathedral windows to my left. Thick fog blocked the view, and I tried to remember seeing any of it last night. But I'd been distracted and panicked, barely remembering how we'd even gotten to Lucien's building.

A long hallway greeted me at the top of the stairs, each exquisitely carved black door shut. Maybe everything up here was private, but that didn't stop me from trying one of the handles anyway.

To my surprise, the door opened and low purple lights flickered to life beneath a long media console. Sitting on top was a large male bust and candles of all different shapes and sizes. But the focal point of the room was the swing that hung down from the ceiling.

A swing? In a house? Why would—

Ohh. That wasn't Lucien getting in touch with his inner child on a playground—that was a sex swing.

And suddenly, I felt like I was intruding.

I wasn't going to think about how hot it was that he had a room like that in his house, something that really shouldn't be surprising, considering he owned a sex club.

Ignoring the way my pulse started to race, I backed out of the room and shut the door behind me. Maybe exploring was a little too invasive.

I leaned back against the door and took in a couple of deep breaths. Just because he had a room like that didn't mean he'd want *me* to go in it. But the longer I stood there trying to calm my thumping heart, the harder it was to decide if it was the idea that he *didn't* want me to go in there or the idea that he might that had me breathing erratically.

Shaking my head, I pushed off the door, heading toward the next room down the hall. This one had a double door, and as I reached for the handle, I paused.

What if this was Lucien's room? No, he'd said that was downstairs, near mine.

I pushed down on the handle, wondering for a brief moment if it would indeed open, and just like the first room, the door opened wide.

Lucien hadn't been lying when he said I could make myself comfortable in his home. There really was nothing off-limits here.

I stepped through the door and braced myself for what I might find. But when my eyes landed on several walls of floor-to-ceiling bookshelves, my mouth fell open.

Wow…

Dark walnut floors, a beautiful rug at the center of the large space, and plush couches that looked like a dream all invited me to come inside and take a seat. It was cozy, inviting, and, unlike the other room, immediately put me at ease.

I quietly shut the door and headed toward one of the bookshelves, where a tall ladder on wheels extended to a rung at the very top. It was incredible, unlike anything I'd ever seen before. I read the spines of some books and saw that they'd been broken up into sections.

Fiction. Nonfiction. Biographies.

No wonder Lucien was so knowledgeable. The man had his very own private library up here in his sanctuary. As I moved along the shelves, my

eyes landed on a section he'd labeled *Classics*. I cocked my head, reading some of the titles there.

The Count of Monte Cristo, *Frankenstein*, Homer's *Odyssey*, *Poetry of Robert Frost*, and one called *The Canterbury Tales.*

Deciding to take a chance on that one, I carefully took it from the shelf and ran my fingers over the cover. It was plain and showed slight signs of age, but was otherwise in immaculate condition. I took a seat on the couch and opened it up.

The writing inside was difficult to read, like something from a gothic novel. The pages were so thin, it felt as though I was handling something precious and fragile. I had no idea where you would find something like this out in the real world. But here in Lucien's library it seemed somehow fitting.

I slowly turned the pages, noting that the book was first published in 1476. My hand hovered over the page as I stared at the date, my mind spinning as I took in the odd style of writing, the condition of the book, and the idea that maybe this was a…first edition? But then I shoved that thought aside, because who would leave a first edition that old just hanging around on a random bookshelf?

As I opened the book to the first story inside, the title was easy enough to read—"A Knight's Tale." That seemed fitting, as I thought of the gallant way Lucien had saved me last night. How he'd stepped out of the shadows and fought off the horrible beast Rupert, before offering me a hand and giving me somewhere safe to stay.

My lips tugged up on one side at the fantastical story I'd just created in my mind as I settled back into the couch and tucked my legs up under me.

So now I was casting myself as some damsel? I didn't think so. But I did like the idea of Lucien being my knight in shining armor. He sure had the looks for it.

I bit down into my lip, remembering the way he'd watched me from across the dining room table as I tried the teas he'd made for me. When I finally told him which one I liked, his eyes had almost…sparkled at me.

I shook my head. There I went again, imagining things. What would Lucien care what I did or didn't like? He didn't know me. But he sure seemed interested in *trying* to. Something Rupert had never done.

Not wanting *him* to invade this cozy spot I'd found for myself, I refocused on the book in my lap and started to read.

As I got caught up in the tale of competition, a chivalrous knight, and courtly love, the minutes passed by and the comfort of the couch had my vision starting to blur. Last night's activities hadn't led to much sleep, and as my body relaxed and my eyes fell shut, I drifted off into a dream where a dark-haired knight had come to save me.

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7

LUCIEN

"HOW THE HELL did he get in my club?" I glared at the screen, where Malcolm had pulled up the video of Rupert and Kai at The Veil's entrance. The rage that simmered beneath my outwardly calm façade came boiling back up to the surface.

What a piece of shit.

I watched as he waved his credit card around, obviously not pleased that he had to wait. It was required that a current member had to vouch for anyone new. As the man who'd done just that came into view, I cursed.

"Mike Vance," Malcolm said. One of the richest investment bankers in the city, and someone who should know better.

"I want him gone," I said.

Malcolm nodded. "Done."

He'd be stripped of every membership to every club I owned in the world, which also meant he'd be banned from reputable competitors' establishments as well.

None of us put up with that shit.

A few taps on the keyboard and Malcolm pulled up an entire health and fact sheet on Rupert McGuire and guest.

"Fifty-seven years old, the only child of world-renowned artists. His mother did the *Lady of the Nile* that hangs in the Louvre, so naturally the son, with no creative ability of his own, went into management instead. He jumped around to different galleries before landing a job at the Manhattan

Contemporary Gallery, but it looks like he was on his way out before suddenly being granted the top position."

"Let me guess. His parents promised their work to the gallery before they passed in exchange for Rupert gaining director status."

Malcolm leaned back in his chair. "Reads like a clichéd novel, doesn't it?"

"It does. But you left out the part about becoming a narcissistic sociopath who preys on young men."

"I was getting to that." He scrolled down a few pages until a few candid photos of Rupert with other twenty-somethings—perhaps even younger—popped up. All with slender builds, all attractive. All with the same vacant look in their eyes.

"He just switches them out," I murmured, shaking my head. "Are there any photos of him with Kai?"

"He doesn't seem to take these guys to events. At least, there's no evidence of that. No professional photos. No sight of them at gallery events or even mentioned anywhere."

"Huh. You would think he'd want to show them off. He's rich. Unattractive. Getting older. He doesn't want to prove he can get a hot young thing? Why not?"

Malcolm rubbed a hand over his buzz cut and shrugged. "Because they don't come from money?"

That was definitely part of it. Could be he was keeping his playthings on the side so he could catch a bigger fish. Or keeping them to himself so they wouldn't realize they were getting the shit end of the stick with him.

Fuck that guy.

"I want to know everything. Leave no rock unturned. Got it?"

"You got it, boss."

I shoved back from my desk, disgust running through my veins as I remembered the frightened way Kai had looked sitting on the couch in here the other night. I might not know everything right now, but I would get to the bottom of who Rupert McGuire was, and when I did, he was going to be sorry he ever set foot inside my club.

By the time I got back to my place I had about as much intel as Malcolm was going to be able to get the legal way. So anything else I wanted to know about Rupert, I was going to have to get via *less-than*-legal ways.

That meant paying a visit to Libertine, the secret and exclusive club I was not only a member of, but also one of the owners, a.k.a. Kings. There were seven of us in total, my brothers and closest confidants, and one of them—Alessio Trentacappelli—just happened to be a tech genius. If anyone could dig up dirt on that fucker Rupert, it was him.

But that was a project for another day. Right now, my focus was on getting back upstairs and seeing if I still had a house guest. It could go either way. But after breakfast this morning, and finally having some sort of conversation with Kai, I was hoping I'd made a breakthrough with the young man.

I unlocked the door and headed inside, doing a quick sweep of the living area, trying to spot him. But he was nowhere to be seen, and disappointment settled in the pit of my stomach.

What had I expected? He'd run last night, so why wouldn't he run again? But as I tossed my keys on an entry table and moved farther into my place, I noticed the guest bedroom door open and Kai's leather pants and clothes strewn across the end of it.

Maybe he was in the kitchen.

I wandered through the dining room and noted the breakfast plates were gone from the table, and half expected to find them on the kitchen island. Instead, I was shocked to find the place all neat and tidy, not a dirty plate in sight.

Curious if my suspicions were correct, I opened the cabinet I'd gotten the coffee and tea set out of and saw it put away as though it hadn't been used. I chuckled, trying to imagine how Kai had gotten it back in place, considering it was on the top shelf.

Had he climbed up on the counter? Used a chair? He was so short that I would've paid good money to watch him boost himself up there and carefully place each item back.

Okay, so not downstairs, but still here…

I glanced up the staircase, smiling as I thought about the different rooms he might've stumbled into up there, then made my way up.

The doors were all shut, so I was going to have to play a little hide-and-seek before I found him, but that was okay. I'd wanted him to feel comfortable and to explore, and I was curious as to where he'd ended up.

I pushed open the door to my playroom, the one with my favorite swing and the purple lights, and while I might've secretly hoped to find him

curled up in that naughty little apparatus, I wasn't exactly shocked to find it and the room empty.

Shutting the door, I made my way to the next room, my library. This felt more up Kai's alley—quiet, cozy, tucked away from everyone and everything—and when I gently pushed open the door, I spotted him curled up on one of the oversized couches.

Kai's eyes were shut and an open book rested on his chest. He was the very picture of peace and tranquility. So much so that he didn't even hear me as I slipped inside.

I kicked off my shoes and made my way to one of the other couches in the room, and as I lowered myself into it, Kai shifted. My body stilled, and for a second I thought he would wake, but instead he snuggled deeper into the pillows.

My chest tightened at the sight of him. So small. So fragile. I wanted to scoop him up in my arms and tell him everything was going to be all right. But considering he kept at least a six-foot distance between us at all times, I'd have to settle for knowing he'd not only decided to stay here until I got home, he'd let his guard down enough to fall asleep in a room without locking the door.

Wanting him to get as much rest as he needed, I pulled my phone out and decided to go through several emails waiting in my inbox. I answered a few that were club related, then replied to a couple of Libertine messages. But even as I worked, my eyes kept drifting away from my phone to the sleeping man opposite me.

Who *was* Kai Daniels? What was his story?

I was just about to go back to my emails when Kai shifted again on the couch, but this time his eyes fluttered open. He blinked several times, and I smiled.

"Hello."

Kai's eyes widened and he scrambled up the couch, the book falling from his chest to his lap as he pulled his legs up under himself.

"Uh… Hi." He looked around the room, toward the door I'd left open, and when he saw that escape was still an option, he visibly relaxed. "I'm sorry, I was looking around a little and saw all your books and—"

"Hey, hey, it's all right." I chuckled as I looked toward the shelves I'd filled throughout my travels over the years. "I bought them to be read, so it's nice to have someone other than me looking at them."

Kai smoothed his hands over the cover of the book he'd chosen, holding it like a rare artifact—which it actually was.

"What story did you end up choosing to read? There's several in that one."

"'A Knight's Tale.' I only got a little ways in when I fell asleep." Kai sprang to his feet, his eyes darting back to the space on the shelf he'd taken it from. "But I'm done now."

Without thinking, I reached for him, taking hold of his wrist, and Kai's feet froze. I could feel his pulse jackhammering beneath my fingertips as I stared up at him—and just as I was about to let him go, Kai slid his tongue along his lower lip.

Hmm, curious…

I couldn't tell if he was nervous or something else altogether. But when he didn't yank his arm away, and instead glanced down to where I had a hold of his wrist, I wanted to ease any worry he might have.

"You don't have to put it back." I grazed my thumb over his soft skin and gestured to the book. "I was just going to ask if you were enjoying it."

Kai looked down to where he was clutching the hardback against his body. "I mean, it's a total fantasy, but yeah, it's great."

"It's always been one of my favorites," I said as I let him go and relaxed back into my couch. "You don't think it could happen? Some chivalrous knight fighting for his love?"

"For nothing? No way. That doesn't happen in real life."

I crossed one leg over the over. "Okay, my cynical little friend. What if he's just doing it out of the kindness of his heart?"

Kai snorted and rolled his eyes, and for some reason that felt like a breakthrough of sorts.

"You don't think that could happen?"

Kai opened his mouth as though about to respond, but then shut it.

"No, no, don't do that. You were going to say something—say it."

"It's just never been my experience, that's all."

"Hmm." I stroked my fingers along my jaw, and it didn't escape my notice the way Kai's eyes followed the move. "Maybe I'll be able to help change your mind about that."

Kai's brow furrowed as I slowly got to my feet, and when he didn't back up, my chest tightened.

I tapped the cover of the book. “Keep it. In fact, why don’t you leave it here on the table so when you want to read it again you won’t have to hunt around for it.”

Kai tipped his chin up, and the angles of his face under the lights were shown off to sheer perfection. His lips were full and lovely in a way that enhanced his already stunning features.

“Are you sure?” His voice was soft, but the question clear. “Lucien?”

My name from his lips for the first time made something other than my chest tighten, but not about to think about *that*, I refocused on him.

“Yes, of course. You’re welcome to read anything in here. I just ask that you keep the books in this room. It’s temperature controlled to preserve their condition and quality.”

Kai looked down at the copy of *The Canterbury Tales*. The one that had cost a small fortune to acquire, given there were only twelve left in print.

“Um…just how *much* quality are we talking here?”

I stepped around him, heading for the door. “Oh, there’s no need to put a price on something so lovely.”

“In other words, I shouldn’t be holding this, should I?”

“I believe things are put out into the world to be enjoyed. Otherwise, what’s the point?”

“Okay, but seriously, how much was it?”

I stopped in the doorway and glanced over my shoulder at him, a smirk playing at my lips. “Eight point five million dollars.” As shock registered across his face, I winked and gestured to the book. “Enjoy. I’ll call you when dinner gets here.”

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8

KAI

I RECOGNIZED THE doorman when he knocked on Lucien's door a little while later. He had a luggage cart with him, packed to the brim with bags.

"Perfect," Lucien said, taking the two takeout bags off the top of the heap. As he headed to the kitchen with them, he nodded toward my guest room. "The rest can go in there, Arnuad. Thank you." The man nodded and headed toward the bedroom. Lucien called out, "By the way, how are the grandkids? Did they enjoy their time in the city?"

"Yes, sir, they had a wonderful time. It's always great to catch up with Bella and the boys."

"Love to hear it."

As Arnaud began to unload the bags in a neat row, I frowned but didn't follow after him to see what he'd brought. It wasn't my business. It wasn't actually my room. It was just the place I'd stayed in last night.

So what was I still doing here?

Lucien strolled out of the kitchen, a to-go box in his hand. "Don't even think about saying no," he said to Arnaud. "It's your favorite."

The doorman shook his head. "With all due respect, you don't know my favorite, Mr. Vale."

"No?" Lucien arched a dark brow. "You mean to tell me you don't order the spicy, crispy sea bass from Wo Hop every year on your birthday?"

Arnaud pursed his lips like he was going to deny it, but then a small smile broke free. "As always, you don't miss a thing. But it's not my

birthday.”

“I know.” Lucien held the food out to him. “Take it.”

Arnaud shook his head, but did what Lucien asked anyway, and I didn’t miss the bills tucked in the side flap of the box.

Why did I get the feeling this was something Lucien did often?

“Come,” he said to me, nodding toward the bedroom.

As we entered, I could make out the label splashed across each bag, some upscale clothing shop I’d never personally been to, but had passed many times.

“Did you run out of clothes?” I said, the words coming out before I could stop them, because this was a *lot* of clothing.

“These aren’t for me.” Lucien turned one of the bags upside down on the bed, spilling out the contents, and then winked at me. “These are for you.”

I looked at him, then the clothes, then back at him. He had to be joking…right? There was no way he’d bought all this for *me*.

I shook my head, still in disbelief even as he held up a sweater that was several sizes too small for him, but perfect for me.

He began to lay the garments out in separate stacks: pants, shirts, sweaters, pajamas. More upturned bags joined the piles, all while I stood there and stared.

“Don’t feel like you have to wear anything you don’t love. Try them on and keep what you like.”

“But…” I didn’t even know what to say, because the clothes just kept coming. I rubbed my forehead. “Why?”

When Lucien looked up from folding a pair of jeans, I forced myself to continue.

“I don’t understand. I have clothes; they’re just not”—I paused when I realized *where* they still were—“here.”

Lucien nodded and continued to neatly stack the clothes. “Do you want me to send for them?”

After the showdown at the club with Rupert, I didn’t think it was a good idea at all for Lucien to be anywhere near him. Besides, there was no guarantee Rupert hadn’t thrown them all out on the street. “No, no. Don’t do that.”

“Okay, but I can’t imagine you enjoy wearing *my* clothes.”

They were the nicest pajamas I'd ever worn in my life, but I knew he was referring more to the fact that the waist and sleeves were rolled up several times.

Not to mention these particular silk pajamas had been on Lucien's body…

I shook the thought out of my head. I shouldn't be thinking about him like that. Shouldn't admit I didn't at all mind wearing his clothes.

Moving closer to the bed, I ran my fingers over the soft cotton shirt at the top of one of the stacks. I had questions, so many questions, but before I could ask any of them, Lucien turned toward me and sat on the edge of the bed.

"I wanted to," he said. "That's why. I don't want you to think you ever have to go back there, not for any reason, and certainly not for clothes." He shrugged a shoulder. "It's really as simple as that."

Keeping my gaze down, I tried to take in what he was telling me, but it just seemed impossible. One outfit? Maybe. Buying out the entire store?

"It's too much," I said before meeting his eyes.

The corner of Lucien's mouth quirked, and he nodded. "Yeah. I wasn't sure what you'd like, but to be honest, I'm not very good at editing myself."

I couldn't help but crack a smile, because if there was one thing I'd learned in the time I'd been here, it was that Lucien was over the top. But in the best way.

He stood and gestured to the clothes. "Pick one outfit, pick ten. Keep them all—doesn't matter to me. Just find something that won't have you tripping up the stairs."

As he headed out of the room, my eyes roamed over him and the way his body filled out every inch of his all-black outfit to perfection. It wasn't one of the starched suits most of the businessmen I'd known wore to work, but something far more luxurious and tempting, especially with the way he left his shirt unbuttoned down to the top of his chest.

Lucien glanced over his shoulder, and I jerked my gaze up, praying he hadn't noticed my checking him out.

"Now let's go eat. I'm fucking starving."

He headed out of the room and I followed, expecting we'd be eating in the dining room. But when he stopped by the coffee table and tossed a couple of the oversized cushions onto the rug, I paused.

“I’ll be right back. You want water with your dinner or something stronger?”

“Um, water, please,” I said, and took a seat, crossing my legs under the table.

“You got it.” He was in and out of the kitchen in minutes, returning to the living room with the second to-go bag and two goblets, because of course that was what he drank water out of. “I wasn’t sure what to order for dinner, but I figured since New York has some of the best Chinese around, we should indulge.”

He placed the items on the table and, instead of taking the spot at the opposite end, moved to sit next to me instead. “Are you a fan?”

“Of Chinese food?”

He nodded and started to pull out the containers.

“Yeah, I just never really had a chance to eat much of it.”

“Well, that’s about to change tonight. Now, I didn’t want to get too much food and overwhelm you—” I chuckled softly and his hands froze in midair. “Is something amusing?”

I clamped my lips together in an effort not to grin and shook my head.

“I think you’re laughing at me.”

“No, I—”

“Have every right to.” He went back to pulling out the containers. “I’m ridiculous, I know that. But in my defense, I only ordered three meals off the menu. I *was* going to get all of them.”

“Oh my God.” I lost the battle then, and a laugh sputtered out of me. “Who *are* you?”

“Lucien Vale,” he said, opening up each container and handing me a plate. “You can look it up—I’m not lying.”

“I don’t think you’re lying. It’s just, this all feels so…surreal.” I looked around the living room, lingering on several paintings and sculptures on display. “Your place is incredible.”

“Thanks.” Lucien put a set of chopsticks on the table for me, then snapped apart his own. “It took a few years to get it exactly the way I liked, but it’s almost there.”

“*Almost?*” I laughed even harder. “You do know the museums need some artifacts too, right?”

“Wow. Look at you, making a joke.” Lucien’s eyes twinkled. “I mean, it was at my expense, *but* I’ll let it pass, since it’s so nice to hear you laugh.”

I immediately stopped.

“Hey now, don’t go all quiet on me. Your entire face lights up when you laugh, and you’re right, I really *do* need to stop outbidding the galleries.”

I chuckled despite myself and picked up the chopsticks, my mouth watering over the food set out in front of me. I had no problem with Lucien outbidding any galleries, especially if it was Rupert’s.

“Next you’re going to tell me you learned how to use chopsticks on a trip you took to China.”

“Actually…”

My hand dropped to the table, my jaw following. “No you didn’t.”

“No, I didn’t.” Lucien grinned like a fiend. “I learned right here in New York City. I told you, Wo Hop is the best Chinese food around. But I did learn a whole lot of other interesting things on my trip to China.”

“Like the fact they use butt plugs to keep in someone’s energy?”

“Ah, so you *were* paying attention that first night.”

“It’s not exactly something a person forgets.” I glanced over at the artifact under discussion. “Especially when it’s on such prominent display.”

Lucien chuckled as he dished out some barbecue ribs and then offered them to me. I took the container and put a couple of pieces on my plate.

“Did you ever walk the Great Wall?” I asked.

“Some of it.”

“Not the whole thing?”

“I’d still be walking it instead of sitting here with you. It’s over thirteen thousand miles long.”

“I knew it was big, but that seems excessive.” When Lucien raised a brow, I added, “Which is why you went, am I right?”

“See? We’re starting to know each other already.” When he held up the carton of noodles, I nodded, and he added some to my plate. “How do you feel about spice?”

“I love it.” I didn’t know why, but as soon as the words were out of my mouth, I felt heat creep up the back of my neck. He was talking about the food, I knew that, but my mind instantly went to the swing upstairs and the first time I’d seen Lucien sitting on a throne at his club. I hadn’t wanted to admit it, not to him or even myself, but it had been hard to look away. The power he commanded as he watched over the room, the sex he exuded even more than the couples going at it… Lucien Vale was mesmerizing.

Keeping my eyes on the noodles that kept falling out of my chopsticks, I said, “What’s your favorite place you’ve ever been?”

He tilted his head like he was thinking it over. I didn’t watch the way his throat worked as he swallowed, not at all. Or notice the dark hair that grazed his jaw and upper lip. Or think about whether it would tickle or scratch softly against my skin—

“I think it’s somewhere I haven’t been yet,” Lucien said as he reached for his water. “And by saying that, I don’t want to diminish all the extraordinary places I’ve been to, I just mean…” He met my eyes, so many layers in their dark depths to get lost in. “I’ll know when I’ve found it.”

I didn’t realize I was holding my chopsticks midair, noodles dangling as I hung on Lucien’s words, until he nodded at them.

“Are the noodles okay? I think there’s rice too—”

“No, this is great.” I swallowed them down, and I hadn’t been lying. They were the best I’d ever tasted, but that wasn’t surprising—from what I’d seen, Lucien’s taste was immaculate, from his beautiful place to dinner to the clothes he’d gotten for me, and even the tea this morning. I had high hopes for the chicken then, and I carefully picked up a piece that wobbled between my chopsticks.

My eyes slammed shut as I chewed, the flavor so delicious I just wanted to savor it. I might’ve even moaned around it, judging by the way I saw Lucien watching me intensely when I opened my eyes.

I chuckled softly, masking my embarrassment behind my napkin.

“No, you don’t have to hide,” Lucien said, gently lowering my arm from my face. “If you’re enjoying it, you should show it. Never be ashamed of pleasure, in whatever form it takes.”

I lowered my gaze, unable to hold his when he was talking about pleasure and looking at me as though I would taste as good as the food we were eating. And the scary thing? Lucien was so charming, so easy to be myself around, that I almost offered him a bite.

Deciding to focus on my food instead of the man sitting next to me, I devoured half my plate before I heard him say, “You never told me *your* favorite place that you’ve visited.”

The question was harmless enough—I’d just asked him the same exact thing. But not having half as many exciting journeys up my sleeve as he did—really, none at all—I swallowed and lowered my chopsticks to my plate.

Who was I fooling? Thinking I could sit here in this ostentatious apartment, conversing with a man of the world who had more knowledge in his little finger than I did in my whole body.

He'd said he was "ridiculous" earlier, but it was me who was kidding himself.

"Kai?"

I picked up my napkin and dabbed at the corner of my lips, my stomach full yet again from a meal Lucien had so generously offered me.

"Thank you so much for the meal," I said, and started to get to my feet, but Lucien reached for my hand, stopping me.

"Wait a second. Did I say something to upset you?"

I shook my head, heat blooming on my cheeks at how naïve I must seem to him. But I didn't want him to think he'd done anything wrong. After all, he wasn't the problem here—I was. He'd taken me in, fed me, given me somewhere to sleep. He'd been nothing but kind.

How could I possibly repay him?

Hell, I couldn't even have an engaging conversation with the man because I had literally nothing to contribute.

"No. I'm just tired, that's all."

Lucien's features softened as he reluctantly let go of my hand. "Are you sure? That doesn't seem like that's all."

I pushed to my feet and stared down into eyes dark with concern. "I don't know, it's just I don't have any stories of treks along the Great Wall."

"So what? I don't want stories about that. I've already done it. I want to know about you. Your life. The places you've seen."

I shrugged, doing my best to brush off just how desperately I wanted to believe him. How much I craved someone to care about me.

"It's not half as exciting as your life." Lucien frowned, and I gestured toward the food. "Would you like some help putting this away?"

"No, I've got it. I'm sure you're still a little tired after everything that's happened."

"Right." I nodded and headed to my room, and once again took in the piles of clothes inside.

Pick one outfit, pick ten. Keep them all—doesn't matter to me.

I stepped inside and turned to see Lucien was still seated on the floor of his living room, not chasing after me. He was giving me space, something I

suspected was more difficult than he was letting on. But also something I appreciated more than the clothes covering the bed inside.

“Lucien?”

He glanced over his shoulder, and I offered up the best smile I could muster.

“My favorite place I’ve ever been is your library. Sleep well.”

I barely caught his smile as I closed the door and locked it, but it was enough to help me drift off not long after—and have the best night’s sleep I’d had in years.

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9

LUCIEN

CLICK.
CLICK.
CLICK.

It went on like that for the next few nights. Dinner, quiet conversation, some reading, then Kai would disappear into his room and I'd hear the click of the lock.

I could understand why he felt the need to make sure he was safe. From the little I'd gleaned about him—and it was mostly just inference on my part—Kai was in survival mode. I just didn't know how long that had been the case. All I could do, all I *wanted* to do, was give him the time he needed to begin to heal.

As it was, I was enjoying having him around. It'd been a long time since I'd had someone in my personal space. My last dom/sub relationship had existed solely at the club, a situation that had worked out for the both of us, until it had run its course. But I had to admit, having Kai around had brought my dominant nature roaring back to the surface. The need to take care of and provide for someone was so intrinsically ingrained in my psyche that when I saw that beautiful boy in need, I hadn't thought twice about providing him somewhere to stay.

Hell, I'd even rearranged my schedule to have Malcolm cover the evenings I usually spent at The Veil, not wanting to leave Kai alone.

We'd fallen into a routine of sorts, with Kai attempting to help wash up after dinner and my refusing and suggesting he do something more

enjoyable. Curling up on the couch with a newer reproduction of *The Canterbury Tales* was his go-to, since he refused to put his hands on the first edition again. Explaining that books were meant to be read and appreciated did nothing to dissuade him, so I'd ordered the newer copy so he could continue his enjoyment of the tales.

With my work hours temporarily flipped, I found myself joining him every night and indulging in a classic of my own from my library. The silence between us during that time was comfortable, Kai on one end of the couch, me on the other.

But every now and then I'd feel his eyes on me. He watched when he thought I wasn't looking, and shyly glanced away when I did.

It was there, a spark, a *something*, but it would have to simmer for now. Kai was the one in control here, whether he ever wanted to make it more between us or not.

He yawned and closed the book, setting it on the coffee table before getting to his feet. In a pair of jeans and a soft crew-neck sweater that actually fit his small frame, Kai looked entirely at home here—and handsome as ever.

"Good night, Lucien."

I slipped a bookmark between the pages of my novel and looked up. "Sleep well, Kai."

"Thank you. I will." He headed into his room, and I waited for the click of the lock…only it never came.

My eyes drifted to his closed door, and when another minute passed by, a smile slowly spread across my face. He hadn't felt the need to lock it tonight. That in itself felt like a huge win.

It was too bad I couldn't stick around to enjoy it. Tonight I needed to make an appearance at The Veil.

THE MOOD IN the club tonight was fire—couples, throuples, and curious onlookers all out for a good time as they indulged in some of the delicious delights that were on offer.

Do you like to watch? Participate? Or maybe a little bit of both.

I wasn't one to judge. I, myself, liked to dabble in a little bit of everything when I was in the mood. But tonight my mind was focused solely on the business aspect of work, not the pleasure.

Come to think of it, nothing in here had caught my fancy in *that* way since the night Kai walked into The Veil with Rupert.

It was hard to believe it'd only been two weeks. I'd thought it would take longer to coax Kai out of his shell. But little by little he was starting to trust me, and I didn't care if it took two weeks, two months, hell, two fucking years—I would do whatever it took to help him find his footing in the world.

"Boss?"

"Huh?" I turned to see Malcolm with an expectant look on his face. "Oh, you wanted to leave early tonight." It was about an hour or so from closing, and some time during the night I'd forgotten to get back to him about that.

"You mind? Jocelyn's in town for the week and—"

"Say no more. Although"—I arched a brow—"if I find out you're playing in someone else's playground instead of one of mine, don't think I won't dock your pay."

"I wouldn't dare." Malcolm chuckled and clapped me on the shoulder. "Not when your play equipment and toys are the best."

"Damn right they are. Well, be sure to give Joss a kiss for me."

"Yeah, that'd be a no, and don't even think about giving her one yourself the next time you see her."

"Spoilsport. But fair enough. I guess I need to leave *some* people in this city oblivious to my charms."

Malcolm snorted. "It's not your charms I'm worried about. But thanks, I'll check in with you tomorrow."

"Not too early, I hope." I winked at him. "Or I'll feel really sorry for Jocelyn."

"Night, boss." Malcolm threw me wave and headed out for the night through the sea of people on the main floor.

Even with closing time creeping up, the masses hadn't thinned. Each and every one of them was determined to indulge in the final minutes of sinful pleasure they could before security started gently urging them toward the exits.

I made my rounds, checking that the bar was tidied up and the tables and booths were free of any and all objects before the cleaning crew came in first thing tomorrow morning. We opened again at ten a.m., giving us

time to restock alcohol and supplies, and to clean the surfaces to keep the place as hygienic as possible.

With the club now empty, I did a final sweep of the place and, happy everything was in order, headed for the doors.

I locked up, and just as I was about to step off the curb and cross over to my car, a loud *boom* exploded somewhere behind me. Thrown clear off my feet, I landed hard, my face scraping along the ground, no time to catch myself or cover my head.

There was a roar from somewhere, but my ears were ringing, and I couldn't place where the noise was coming from until I turned around.

Jesus Christ.

The whole fucking building was in flames.

My building.

What the holy fuck…

I pushed up to my knees, testing that nothing was broken so I could stand. A quick scan of my body showed a number of cuts and scrapes, but nothing major, and I managed to stumble to my feet.

For a long moment, all I could do was stare in shock, not comprehending what was in front of me.

Smoke from The Veil billowed into the night and flames licked at the sky. My first instinct was to run toward it, but then I remembered no one was inside. I'd been the last, thank God, but what had happened to cause an explosion?

As I reached for my phone to call 911, my eyes caught on someone standing on the other side of the street. He leaned against the black car that sat idling, silently watching the scene play out before him as he smoked a cigarette.

I recognized him instantly. I'd only ever seen him in person once before, but that had been one time too many.

Rupert fucking McGuire.

It was too coincidental that he was here, looking completely unsurprised by the building being on fire.

My adrenaline turned to rage as Rupert blew a puff of smoke in my direction before tossing his cigarette in the road. He smirked at me and climbed into the back of the car, and I clenched my fists as I watched it drive away.

That mother*fucker*. He'd done this to prove a point. To get revenge for my having taken something that he considered his, and to make me watch while he did it.

Considering Kai *his* had been his first mistake.

Fucking with what was mine had been his second.

But if he thought blowing up The Veil would ruin me and get Kai back, he was sorely mistaken. I'd burn everything I owned to the ground before I'd ever hand Kai over to him.

To anyone.

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10

KAI

VIVID DREAMS ASSAULTED my sleep all night. I didn't know if I'd been running in them or what, but I found myself fully awake before dawn.

I sat up and flipped on the light beside me. There wasn't a clock in the room, so I had no idea what time it was, but it was way too early for Lucien to be getting up yet. Too early for me too, but there was no way I could fall back asleep. Something had the pit of my stomach feeling a little unsettled, and I couldn't put my finger on why.

Frowning, I slipped out of the bed and quietly opened the door. It was dead quiet, almost eerily so, and I stepped out to make sure everything was okay with Lucien.

What are you going to do, knock on his door? Go inside if he doesn't answer? Wake him up because you can't sleep?

But it turned out I didn't have to do any of those things, because Lucien's bedroom door was wide open.

I glanced around, expecting to see him having his coffee in the kitchen or even lounging on the couch, but the house felt too still. Like he wasn't there.

I crept down the hallway, chancing a look in his room, which felt a little invasive, considering I'd never seen it before. A black tufted leather headboard rose against dark walls, splashes of rich red woven throughout the room along the bedspread and pillows. It captured Lucien's vibe

perfectly, but it was the fact that the bed was still made, like he hadn't slept in it, that made the unease in my stomach grow.

Maybe he'd gone to work? But as the sunrise was cresting in the distance, that seemed unlikely, as it was hours past closing.

Another, more logical explanation crossed my mind, but that wasn't anything I wanted to think about. That Lucien had a lover.

It made sense. He was beautiful and sexual and absolutely had men begging to get in his bed. Just because he let me stay here didn't mean he had to tell me what he did behind closed doors, and really, I shouldn't care.

So why did the thought of Lucien with someone else make my chest get tight?

The sound of the front door unlocking made me whip my head in that direction. I didn't have time to book it back to my room, but I tried anyway, not wanting Lucien to think I'd been spying.

All those thoughts left my head, though, the second he walked in the door.

With his phone to his ear, he nodded along to whatever was being said as he tossed his keys on the table. But it was the state of him, the disheveled hair and ripped shirt, the cuts on his arm and face, that kicked up my pulse.

"I know," Lucien said, sighing as he ran his hand through his hair. "I'll be there in a couple of hours." He ended the call and rested his fists on the table, dropping his head as he took a deep breath. I could only stare, my mind whirling, trying to come up with an explanation for why he looked like he'd gone through hell and came up empty.

"Lucien?" I didn't mean to infringe on the moment he obviously needed, but worry overtook any rational thought.

He looked up, surprise flickering in his eyes, and then straightened. "Kai. I thought you'd be asleep."

My feet were moving before I'd made the conscious decision to, and when I got close, I could smell the strong scent of smoke and see the singe marks on his pants. I reached out to touch his face, the side that didn't have cuts and what looked like glass embedded in them.

"Oh my God. What happened?"

"It's nothing you need to worry about."

More like nothing he *wanted* me to worry about. "You look like you've been in a war zone."

"Close enough," he muttered, and closed his eyes.

When it appeared I wasn't going to get any more out of him, I went to pull my hand away. But the second my fingers left his face, Lucien took hold of it and brought it back to his cheek.

"Just give me a second," he whispered, and took a deep breath in, curling his fingers around mine as though he were seeking comfort from my touch.

I don't know how long we stood there like that, but when he finally opened his eyes again, he lowered my hand and gently entwined our fingers.

"There was an explosion tonight, down at my club."

I wasn't sure what I'd been expecting, but *that* wasn't it. "An *explosion*?"

"Yes." He squeezed my hand. "No one was hurt—it was after everyone had left. I locked up and was on my way out, and it just…exploded."

"How?" This was insane. There was no way The Veil wasn't up to code. Not with the kind of high-end establishments Lucien ran. And the fact that he was standing there telling me no one was hurt when it was clear *he* had been, had questions flying out of my mouth before I could stop them. "Is the club going to be all right? How big was the explosion? Will you be able to salvage anything?"

"It's a complete loss. Nothing's left. Unless you count the burning shell they were still working on extinguishing when I left."

"Oh my God… I…I don't know what to say."

"There's nothing to say, but Kai, there's something I have to tell you."

Me? Why would he need to tell me anything? I wasn't the one who'd just watched my business go up in flames.

"Rupert was there."

Confused, I took a step back, sure that I'd misheard him. "Rupert was where?"

"Outside the club. The explosion threw me out into the road, and when I came to and got to my feet, I spotted Rupert."

No. I shook my head. He had to be mistaken. Why would Rupert be waiting outside The Veil?

"He was watching me, Kai. Do you understand? He was watching my club burn down."

Shock slammed into me hard, stealing my breath.

Rupert had been there.

Rupert had been watching Lucien.

Rupert had burned his fucking club down.

I understood exactly what Lucien was telling me, and as the realization hit me that *I* was the reason he had almost died tonight, I yanked my hand from his.

My heart started to hammer, and I brought a fist to my mouth.

"Why?" I whispered, shaking my head. "This makes no sense."

Then I started to pace, the fear and anxiety flooding my body as Rupert's face flashed before my eyes.

"He doesn't care about me. He doesn't even like me. He treated me like I was a piece of property. Only took me out of my room to use me."

A dangerous sound, like a low growl, broke through my chaotic thoughts. I stopped and looked over to Lucien, and the expression on his face was downright menacing. It should've scared me, and under normal circumstances it probably would've, but something about that look made me feel…protected.

"That's exactly why he did it." Lucien's jaw clenched. "He *cares* that I took something that he considers his."

"But that's just— No." I swiped my hand through the air and, mind made up, marched into my room.

I was *not* going to be the reason that something happened to Lucien. I was already responsible for his club, his place of business, going up in flames with him practically inside it. I would be damned if I stuck around and watched Rupert destroy or—even worse—kill him.

Fuck. That.

I pulled open the bottom drawer of the bureau where I'd stuffed my clothes the first night I arrived and pulled them out. Then I got to my feet and turned, ready to leave Lucien exactly the way I'd found him—alive—and instead bumped right into him.

"What are you doing?" He looked down at the clothes I held, then brought his eyes back to mine, and the gash on his face made my determination even stronger.

"I'm leaving."

"And why would you do that?"

"Um, Rupert blew up your club because of me."

"True." Lucien took my clothes out of my hand. "But he also blew it up because he's an asshole with an inferiority complex."

“And what if he does more bad things? You could’ve died tonight.”

“I could’ve.” My mouth fell open as he casually tossed my clothes on the bed. “But I didn’t, and that was his first mistake. Your leaving doesn’t fix anything. It lets him win. Unless you’re unhappy here.”

“You know I’m not.”

“Then stay. As little or as long as you like. Don’t let him make that decision for you. My home is your home.”

Then stay…

It was the first time he’d said the words, and the first time I’d really had to acknowledge them and decide what I wanted to do next.

Stay or go.

“You mean that?”

“I never say anything I don’t mean.”

I slowly reached out, took his hand in mine, and led him over to the bed.

Lucien’s eyes widened a little as I urged him down onto it, and once he was seated I said, “Okay then, sit here and I’ll be right back.”

As I headed to the bathroom to rummage through the drawers and cabinets for what I needed, my mind raced. I couldn’t believe Rupert would set fire to Lucien’s club, but I knew in my gut it was true. He’d done this. It was so irredeemable that any thought I’d given to whether I should go back was instantly snuffed out.

God. Imagining what he’d done made me break into full-body shudders as I wet several washcloths and filled a separate cup with water. Rupert wasn’t the best guy in the world, I wouldn’t argue that point, but I never thought he’d do something so dangerous. Arson? Just to prove a point? The guilt and anger I felt at what he’d done made me sick to my stomach. He could’ve *killed* Lucien. It didn’t matter that I hadn’t known him for long—a world without Lucien Vale was unfathomable.

Focus on him, then. Take care of cleaning him up and not what you wish you could do to Rupert right now.

I’d ask Lucien for ointment and bandages later, but for now his cuts needed to be cleaned, and the glass embedded in them taken out. I grabbed everything I needed and headed back to where he hadn’t moved from his position on the bed. *My* bed. And according to him, mine for as long as I wanted it to be.

Lucien took one look at the armful of washcloths and other supplies and raised an eyebrow.

“Don’t argue,” I said. “You don’t need an infection.” I reached for the tweezers.

“You’re the boss.”

“Yes, I am,” I agreed, scanning his face and arms for a starting point. Deciding on the cut along his cheek, I lifted my hand and tried to keep it steady even though my nerves were frayed to hell. Even worse, though, was that I hadn’t exactly thought through how close I would be to Lucien or the way the proximity made my heart take a flying leap out of my chest. His dark eyes stayed on my face, watching me intently as I plucked the small shard of glass from the wound.

I glanced down, looking for something to drop it in. Without looking away from me, Lucien reached for a washcloth and spread it out along his palm.

“Thank you,” I said, letting the glass fall into his covered hand before going back for the next piece. It was a shame for anything to mar such an attractive face, but hopefully the cuts would all heal okay once I got them cleaned up.

“You’ve done this before,” Lucien murmured as I dipped a washcloth into the cup of water and gently began to rinse the cut.

I shrugged a shoulder. “Not really.”

“No? Not even for a clumsy little brother or sister?”

“I don’t have any siblings,” I said. “But even if I did, I wouldn’t have been around.”

The heat from Lucien’s stare was intense, but I didn’t dare look at him, keeping my eyes focused on the job at hand. “Because…?” he asked.

I swept the blood from Lucien’s cheek and picked the tweezers back up. “My parents kicked me out when I was fifteen. There was no one else to take care of besides myself.”

There was a slight tic in Lucien’s jaw at my confession, but his voice remained controlled when he said, “You were just a child.”

“Yeah, well. Even children have to grow up.”

Wow, had I really unloaded that on him when he’d just survived an explosion? My problems weren’t anything compared to that, and I snapped my mouth shut and scanned the other gashes on his face.

The one at his chin had a fragment stuck inside, and with the tips of my fingers, I tilted his head back for better access.

That was a mistake. A big one.

My heartbeat stuttered at the sight of his neck, so close and so vulnerable…and so damn sexy. The way the dark scruff at his jaw tapered down his neck and all that tanned skin… I couldn't stop staring. My lips tingled, aching to brush up against him, to see what he felt like. Tasted like.

Lucien kept still as I trailed my fingers lightly down the side of his neck. There weren't any marks on this side, and it felt safe to touch him there without causing any pain. I didn't even realize what I was doing, though, not until I felt the way his pulse raced beneath my touch. The rapid beat contradicted his calm exterior, and I froze, wondering if I'd gone too far.

"Did you get them all?" Lucien said after a long, silent moment.

I jerked my hand back. "Um. Almost." I refocused on removing the glass embedded into his chin, that one a little deeper than the others. To his credit, he didn't flinch, not even when I grabbed one of the wet cloths and held it firmly against the wound to stanch the trickle of blood that started up again.

Concentrating hard, I didn't notice that I was standing between Lucien's spread thighs until my hip brushed up against the inside of his leg. My stomach flipped, but I didn't dare move and bring his attention to it. I didn't want him to move away, even though I knew I should.

After cleaning the marks on his face, I looked over each of them again, making sure I hadn't missed anything. Then I reached up, brushing his hair back from where it had fallen down his forehead, and didn't see any scrapes there.

"Much better, but you'll still need some antiseptic, maybe even a Band-Aid for your chin."

"It'll be fine."

When our eyes caught and held, I suddenly couldn't breathe. I fell headfirst into those dark depths, and I had to brace my hands against his shoulders to keep myself upright. But the moment I touched him, his injuries came flooding back in my mind, and I dropped my hold, hoping I hadn't made anything worse.

Before I could back up, Lucien reached out, his hand flexing against my hip to still me.

"I'm okay," he said, as if he could read my mind. "Nothing got me there."

My shoulders relaxed, but looking down at his arms, I could still see glass reflecting the light.

I retrieved the tweezers, and when he started to lower his hand, I shook my head. “Hold still for me.”

It was just a happy coincidence that his arm was at the perfect angle while he was touching me. Obviously I wasn’t above using whatever I could for my benefit.

Lucien’s fingers tightened slightly on my hip before he nodded. “I will.”

As I carefully extracted the debris from his forearms, he kept his word, staying completely motionless while he watched me.

It felt like a privilege to be able to touch him like this, to be in his personal space and have him want me there, even if it was under the pretense of my helping him.

There were more scrapes on the insides of his wrists and arms, like he’d fallen and caught himself on pavement or something abrasive. I cleaned them as best as I could, but he would definitely need more than just water to get those to heal quickly.

When I told him that and asked about bandage wraps, Lucien rose to his feet. Gratitude shone in his eyes as he cradled my face between his large hands ever so gently.

“Thank you for looking after me,” he said. “You’re good at that.”

Then he leaned down like he was going to kiss my forehead, but before he made contact, I surprised the both of us by lifting my head and capturing his lips instead.

It was barely more than a soft brush of our mouths, but I felt it all the way down to my toes. The kiss instantly ignited something inside me, a hunger I hadn’t realized was there lying in wait, but all too soon it was over.

Lucien drew back slowly, smoothing his thumb over my cheek as he straightened. He was so tall that I had to crane my neck to look up at him, and I swore I thought I saw the faintest hint of a smile on his lips before he said, “Good night, Kai,” and slipped out of my room.

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11

LUCIEN

WARM WATER SLUICED over my aching muscles as I stood under the shower and closed my eyes. I'd known sleep would elude me, plus there was no way I'd been about to get into bed smelling like a damn campfire. I hoped the water would somehow wash away the memory of my club going up in flames.

But as I braced my hands on the tiles and hung my head under the spray, I realized now that nothing was going to erase that. The biting sting from the cuts marring my skin was reminder enough, and even though the shower helped ease some of the tension, it did jack shit to help the fury roiling through me.

I'd somehow managed to keep that under control around Kai, knowing he already felt a tremendous amount of guilt over what happened to The Veil. But as I stood here now, alone, I let the rage course through me.

This was Rupert's fault. I knew that in my very bones. I wiped the condensation from the mirror, and the cuts Kai had tended to were a stark reminder of just how close I'd danced with death tonight.

I touched the wound on my cheek. The one Kai had pulled the glass from. He'd been so gentle, so attentive in how he'd taken care of me. It was hard to believe he'd never looked after someone like that before. A natural, he'd claimed, the underlying pain in his voice when he'd mentioned being kicked out absolutely tearing at my heart.

How could someone do that to a child? To Kai? He'd had such a hard life for someone so young. And that only added to my rage.

I smoothed my fingers down my neck, over to the gash on my arm, and the memory of Kai's soft lips on mine soon took over my thoughts.

That had been unexpected, and so damn sweet. I wasn't even sure he realized he was going to do it until he was in the moment. But that was what happened when something catastrophic took place. Or one's life flashed before their eyes.

And Kai was right—I was lucky I hadn't been killed tonight. But something inside me told me that was planned, not luck. If Rupert wanted me gone, he easily could've made it happen. But it was clear the purpose of his little fireworks display had been to prove a point.

It would've been smarter for him to kill me.

I toweled off quickly, wanting to go check on Kai and make sure he hadn't changed his mind about staying. The last thing I wanted was for him to run off because of some misguided sense of protectiveness he felt toward me. I needed him close by, somewhere I could see him at all times now that I knew what kind of a maniac Rupert was.

Who knew what that fucker was up to? Was he happy with the message he'd sent, or was he just getting started? It was hard to tell with someone as unstable as him.

But one thing I did know was that I needed more eyes on this than just mine.

It was time to bring in King and the rest of my brothers. They'd know what to do. Or at least talk me out of doing something reckless.

I pulled on my clothes and headed out to the living room, and was shocked to see Kai sitting on the couch. The second his eyes landed on me, he sprang to his feet.

"Uh, hi."

The blush that hit his cheeks was adorable as he wrung his hands in front of himself, and despite everything I'd been through tonight, I smiled.

"Hi. Couldn't sleep either?"

"Uh uh."

I nodded and went to pick up my wallet from the table. "Yeah, I get that. Look, I have to go out for a little bit and—"

"Oh, okay."

I could tell by his deflated shoulders that he was disappointed. But he hadn't let me finish.

"I'd like you to come with me."

Kai's head jerked up. "You would?"

"Yes. I need to go and talk to some…friends of mine, and I would feel better having you with me. It's not safe here."

Kai looked around my place, then bit into his lower lip. "You think Rupert would do something to your home?"

He better fucking not. But then again, I'd never imagined he'd blow my club up either.

"I honestly don't know." I crossed over to him and reached for his hand, brushing my thumb over the back of it. "But I'm not willing to risk it or you."

Kai looked down at the pajamas he still wore. "Is there something specific you want me to wear?"

"No." And the fact he felt the need to check with me grated. It was a residual response from Rupert, who no doubt said exactly what he did and didn't want Kai to look like at all times. But that wasn't how I worked. Would never be.

"You should wear whatever you'd feel comfortable in. Hell, you can wear your pajamas if you like."

Kai snorted and shook his head. "I don't think so."

"Why not? They feel good, don't they?"

"They're *pajamas*."

"Fair enough." I shrugged. "But just so you know, no one would bat an eye at your wearing those where we're about to go."

"Then why don't you wear *your* pajamas?" Kai asked, and the sassiness of the question made me feel a sense of pride at how far he'd come.

"Because I don't want to cause pandemonium when we get there." I winked at him and looked at my watch. "Can you be ready in ten minutes?"

Kai nodded and hurried into his room. "I can be ready in five."

KAI HAD THROWN on a pair of black jeans and a lilac cashmere sweater, and the two of us slipped into the back seat of the private car I'd called for in less than five minutes.

My driver had his instructions, so the second the door shut he pulled away from the curb and we were on our way. I glanced at the quiet man beside me and took a second to drink in the sight of him there.

He'd picked this outfit for himself, and I absolutely loved the soft pop of color he'd settled on. It brought out his eyes, enhanced his complexion,

and suited the sweet personality I was seeing more with every day that passed. Like a beautiful butterfly emerging from his cocoon.

"That color looks lovely on you."

"I…" Kai licked at his lips and visibly swallowed. "Thank you."

"You're welcome."

He ran his palm over the sweater. "It's just so soft, and you said to pick something comfortable."

"So I did." My cock ached at the idea of his rubbing himself all over my naked body in that sweater—and *only* that sweater.

Clearing my throat, I made myself look away from him. The last thing I needed was to frighten Kai. Plus, I didn't exactly want to show up to Libertine with a raging hard-on. Especially when I had no plans to visit level five.

I needed to get my body under control, and fast. I also needed to tell Kai a little bit about where I was taking him—or as much as I was allowed to, anyway.

"Kai."

"Hmm?"

"Where we're going right now—there's not too many people who know about it." That was an understatement.

"Is it another club of yours?"

"Kind of. It has a club of mine *in* it. That's not open to the public."

"Oh." Kai cocked his head. "So it's private? Like, a members-only club?"

"Yes. A members-only club that's exclusive to a bigger organization. A secret organization."

"A secret?"

"Right. Only members of the organization and their guests are allowed inside, and usually the guests have to be blindfolded upon entry." Kai's eyes popped wide, and I reached for his hand. "I'm not going to do that with you, though."

"But I'm not a member."

"I know. But I'm not *just* a member either."

Kai's brow furrowed. "What does that mean?"

"It means that I can break a rule or three and get away with it."

He opened his mouth to ask something else, but the car pulled up to the curb and my driver informed us we had arrived.

Kai looked out the window at the black, nondescript building, then back to me. “That’s your exclusive club?”

“You don’t sound impressed.”

“Looks kind of…plain.”

Just as we wanted it to. Most would walk past this place and not think twice about the empty building on the corner. If they only knew what was inside.

We got out of the car, headed to the entrance, and knocked.

Kai looked between me and the door. “It’s locked?”

“It’s…monitored.” Right on cue, the narrow panel at eye level slid open, then it slammed shut and bolts started turning.

“Good evening, Mr. Vale.” As security stood aside and we walked in, Kai’s jaw fell to the floor. Giving him a moment, I turned to the doorman.

“Has King arrived yet?”

“Yes, he’s waiting for you in the restaurant.”

“Thanks. Kai?” He rounded on me, his eyes wide and sparkling under the lights in the front entrance. “You good?”

“Uh, sure.”

I gently took his elbow and guided him toward the elevator, which opened as if I’d commanded it to. Once I hit the button, I asked, “Still think it’s kind of plain?”

Kai scoffed. “This place is deceptive.”

“Ah, see, *that’s* a word I’d use to describe Libertine.”

“Libertine?”

“That’s where you are right now.”

The elevator stopped on the second floor, and when the doors slid open and the delicious scent of food filled the air, I grinned at him.

“Hope you’re hungry.”

“We’re eating? I thought you were meeting someone.”

“Oh, we are. But there’s no harm in enjoying a good meal while we do it.”

Kai followed me into the world-class restaurant, looking completely and utterly gobsmacked. “I’m not dressed for this place.”

“You look fucking stunning here. Trust me.”

He bit back a smile as I led him to the booth where King was seated. He stood up when he saw us, and I had a feeling Kai noticed that King was dressed similarly to him.

The difference was the pure power radiating off him.

“Lucien,” he said, that gravel-deep voice rich with concern, “good to see you in one piece. Even if your face is looking a little worse for wear.”

“Gee, thanks, but I’d still look amazing in many pieces.”

Kai watched our interaction silently until King held his hand out to him.

“You must be Kai. You can call me Ty.”

“Oh, fuck that,” I said, shaking my head. “It rhymes, and the other guys will talk about ‘Kai and Ty’ all damn day. You can call him King.”

King rolled his eyes and gestured for us to join him. After placing our drink orders, he laced his fingers on the table. “Want to tell me what happened?”

“Some motherfucker blew up my place, is what happened.”

King’s eyebrow shot up, and I took a breath and made myself rein it in.

“Sorry. You mean Alessio hasn’t shown you footage from a street camera?” Our resident tech genius had eyes everywhere.

“He has, but I’m asking you.”

Out of the corner of my eye, I saw Kai shift down in his seat, trying to hide behind the menu. He was still feeling guilty, but it was unnecessary. None of the blame for this landed on his shoulders.

“A couple of weeks ago, a man named Rupert McGuire entered my club with Kai, and long story short, he was forcefully removed and banned from the premises. It was clear Kai wasn’t safe with him, and I offered him refuge—”

“Which didn’t go down well with a man like Rupert,” King finished.

“Exactly.”

“So this is all retaliation?”

I nodded. “I’m not sure how much Alessio’s video shows, but Rupert was there. Watching with a smirk on his ugly mug.”

A tall, well-dressed figure moved out of my periphery and leaned against King’s side of the booth. “I can take care of the problem. Just say the word.”

King groaned. “The word is no, Lachlan.”

“I was talking to Lucien.” Lachlan winked at me, looking so deceiving, like a handsome CEO—which he also was—instead of our resident enforcer. Though King hadn’t given him nearly the freedom lately to go as

wild as he enjoyed. Lachlan was itching for a good fight; unfortunately, I had a feeling this thing with Rupert would be a no-go too.

“You know you’re my favorite masked vigilante,” I said, giving him hell at every opportunity for the unconventional way he’d met his boyfriend, Cooper.

King held his hand up to Lachlan to stay quiet and then asked me, “How would you like to handle this?”

“I’d like to put him six feet under—”

Lachlan pumped his eyebrows at my words, and it was tempting to let him handle Rupert. The fucker had it coming, especially after what I could only imagine he’d put Kai through.

“—but I won’t,” I said. That would be too much for Kai. He’d never get over the guilt if something happened because of him.

We’d have to play this a different way.

“Rupert wanted to prove a point,” I said. “And now he has.” When Lachlan cursed, I shrugged. “Sorry, man.”

He flipped me off and headed to the bar as the waiter brought by our drinks.

“You okay?” I asked Kai quietly. I didn’t know what he was thinking, and the last thing I wanted was to make him feel uncomfortable.

“Don’t worry about me.” Defiance flashed in his stormy eyes. “He took something from you. Do whatever you want to make things right.”

My chest tightened at the permission Kai had just granted me, and I looked back at King, who watched our interaction silently. I knew him too well to know his mind wasn’t working a hundred miles a minute.

King rubbed at the dark stubble along his jaw. “It’s possible he could still be targeting other properties.”

“It is. Maybe we should look into targeting a few of his,” I replied.

He nodded. “Might not be a bad idea for you two to leave for a while. Let us look into it for you.”

I’d had a feeling he’d say that. That was what we all did for each other, whatever it took. What King was really saying, though, was to not do anything impulsive and get Kai the hell out of Dodge.

“You’re both more than welcome to my place,” he added, letting me know his private island in the Caribbean was ours if we wanted it.

But while it was an incredible offer, and an unbelievably beautiful location, it was too isolated for where Kai and I stood right now. He’d just

started to trust me, I didn't want him to think I was *kidnapping* him, for fuck's sake.

Besides, Kai wanted to see the world. He needed to be around people and life and entertainment and love and joy. Not hiding away on a deserted island.

"I really appreciate that," I said as a different location came to mind.

"No worries. It's on the table if you want it." King motioned for the waiter. "What are you thinking instead?"

I looked at Kai. "How do you feel about flying?"

"Um. I'm not sure. I mean, I never have."

"Oh yeah? What about race cars?"

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12

KAI

"I CAN'T BELIEVE it," I said for what had to be the millionth time as I stared out the window of the chauffeured Bentley that had picked us up from the airport in Nice, France twenty minutes ago.

I knew my jaw was on the floor, but everything was just so beautiful and brightly colored, and the Mediterranean Sea was *right freakin' there*.

The window opened suddenly, and I jerked away, thinking I'd hit the button by accident, but Lucien smiled and winked at me, encouraging me to take it all in.

Wind whipped at my face, blowing my hair in every direction as I took in a deep lungful of the salty air and grinned.

This was amazing.

The driver said something to Lucien in French.

"He says it'll be a perfect seventy degrees all week," Lucien translated.

Heaven. This was heaven. And Lucien seemed to be enjoying my reaction, always watching and smiling softly. He'd been so great at humoring me since the second I saw the private jet we'd boarded to fly the nine hours across the Atlantic. He told me he assumed I'd be breathing into a paper bag the whole time, what with it being my first flight, and was pleasantly surprised that my excitement had taken over instead.

All I'd known was that our destination was overseas, and he'd mentioned something about race cars. That didn't make any sense to me, and I'd spent a lot of time in the air throwing out guesses.

And then Lucien said our final destination wasn't France.

The car turned off the highway and into busy city streets, but it wasn't just cars that were packed in. Crowds of people waved small flags, huge smiles on their faces as they chanted something I couldn't understand. They seemed to be celebrating, not protesting, as they lined the roads and weaved in between the cars, forcing us to move at a snail's pace. Off in the distance, boats of every size blanketed the sea to the left.

"What's going on?" I asked.

He moved in closer beside me, our legs brushing as he listened to what they were saying as we passed.

"Ah." He laughed and said, "Theo is probably losing his mind right now."

My brows pulled together. "Who's that?"

"A friend of mine." Lucien nodded toward the window and then pointed out the many signs and flags hanging from buildings. "Seems like they're excited for two reasons. The first being the F1 race happening this week. Remember how I mentioned race cars?"

Now that sounded like fun. "What's the second?"

Lucien sat back and smirked as he pulled out his phone. "Seems like the Prince of Monaco just got engaged."

"Monaco? Is *that* where we are?" When he nodded, I sucked in a breath and turned back to the window to take it all in.

Oh my God. I'm in Monaco.

As the car crawled along, one of the women celebrating smiled at me, said something I didn't understand, and then handed me one of the small flags. On one side was what I could only assume was the Monaco flag, and on the other was a happy couple posing for an engagement photo.

"Is this the future king?" I asked.

"In a sense—he'll be the head of state. They don't have kings."

"Okay. But they're all pretty happy about this, huh?"

"It's been a long time coming."

The crowd thinned just a little as we made our way up a side street toward what I could only describe as the biggest mansion I'd ever seen. We definitely weren't headed *there*.

A minute later, as the Bentley pulled into the circular drive, I was eating my words. The door was opened for us, and I stepped out to hear the distant sound of the crowds, and the sea lapping against the cliff nearby.

“So, what do you think?” Lucien asked. “Will this do for the next few days?”

“This would do for the rest of my *life*.”

Lucien chuckled and shut the door. “I know exactly what you mean.” He looked out at the crystal-blue waters below. “Everything feels so vibrant here. But at the same time, peaceful.”

That was the perfect way to describe it. The exuberance of the people on our way through town had filled me with such a sense of excitement. Yet, as I stood there now, looking out at the waves, a feeling of complete and utter serenity washed over me.

“It’s incredible…”

Lucien grinned and looked over his shoulder to the enormous home behind us. “And we haven’t even set foot inside the villa yet. Ready to change that?”

I nodded, eager to see what lay beyond the front doors. “Um, Lucien?”

“Hmm?”

“This place…”

“Yeah?”

“Is it, um, yours?”

Lucien stopped just as we reached the enormous double doors. “Will you think less of me if I say no?”

I shook my head. “Of course not.”

The last thing I wanted was for him to think I was only enjoying myself because of his financial status. I would’ve felt safe and happy staying with Lucien in a sixty-dollar-a-night motel room.

“I’m just messing with you. I partially own it. Along with the rest of my brothers.”

“Oh, you have brothers?” I didn’t know why it never occurred to me that Lucien might have siblings. He’d asked me yesterday about brothers and sisters, and I’d gotten so caught up in my own head that I hadn’t even bothered to return the question.

“Not by blood,” he said, and pushed open the door. “By choice. But that’s a conversation for another time. For now, welcome to Villa Monaco.”

I looked around the bright, open rooms with their cream walls and white marble floors, and nearly half a dozen French doors that opened up onto a wide terrace and pool. You could see from one side of the house to the

other, and each door framed a unique and scenic view of the Mediterranean Sea below.

"Wow…"

"Pretty incredible, right?"

I blinked. How in the world had someone like me ended up standing in a place like this? "That feels like such an understatement."

"Then how would you describe it?"

I shook my head. "I don't have any words. It's…indescribable."

Lucien looked around the living space as though seeing it for the first time and nodded. "I don't know, that seems like a pretty good one. Want a tour?"

He held his hand out to me, and it was such a natural move that my immediate instinct was to slip mine inside it.

"I'd love one."

For the next half-hour, Lucien led me around the main house, showing me where everything from the gourmet kitchen to the movie theater was located. There were about a hundred beds to choose from if I was in the mood to play Goldilocks, or I could just pick the one with the most breathtaking view.

It was a toss-up which would be easier—testing all those beds out or trying to decide what I wanted to look at every day when I woke up. Or I could do what Lucien suggested and pick a different room each night we stayed there.

The options were endless, which seemed to always be the case with Lucien. Anything and everything my heart desired was mine for the asking, which was absolute insanity when I thought about where I'd been this time last month.

But ever since I'd stepped into Lucien's club, I'd gone from a stale, monotonous existence to a whirlwind that had swept me off my feet.

Deciding on one of the rooms that would have the best view of tomorrow's sunrise, I dropped my bags off and went on the hunt for the man who'd told me that this was his "little slice of paradise."

I found him out on the patio, sitting on one of the loungers by the pool, sunglasses on, hair slicked back, and a cocktail in hand. He'd changed into a pair of tight white Speedos that left little to the imagination, and a white linen shirt that fluttered against his glistening, tanned skin. My feet faltered.

“There you are.” Lucien pulled his glasses down so he could look over them at me. “I thought you might’ve gotten lost.”

“Uh, no, I— You got changed.”

“So I did.” He pushed his glasses back in place. “When in Monaco and all…”

“Oh, so no black outfits here?”

“I didn’t say that. But maybe I’ll keep that for when we hit the town one night.”

Something about the casual way he said *we* made my stomach flip. And not in a bad way.

“You decide on a room?”

“I did, yes.” I sat on the lounger beside him then blurted out, “Where’s your room?”

He let me know where it was in relation to mine and added, “So if you need anything at any time, you come get me, okay?”

“Okay.”

I leaned back in the lounger, finally relaxing after a full day of travel, and noticed an ice bucket with bottled water between us.

“Can I?”

“It’s for you. If you want something else I’m happy to make it, but—”

“Water is great.” I took the cap off the bottle and took a long sip. “I don’t really—well, ever—drink alcohol.”

“I figured. Do you mind that I am?”

“No, you should drink whatever you like.” Then it occurred to me that this was the first time I’d actually seen him with anything other than water. “Have you *not* been drinking because of me?”

“I wasn’t sure how you’d feel about it. I wanted to make sure you felt comfortable around me, and—”

“Lucien, I’ve never felt more comfortable around anyone than I do you.” I eyed his glass and offered a shy smile. “Enjoy your drink.”

“I will…now.”

A warm flush swept through my body, and the idea that he’d changed his behavior to make me feel more at ease made my chest tighten and my heart thump a little harder.

We settled into a comfortable silence there under the Monaco sun, and as a light breeze drifted up from the sea below, I shifted onto my side and let my eyes wander over Lucien.

He was *devastatingly* handsome. It was hard to believe he didn't have a line of men knocking on his door demanding his attention. That instead of spending his nights wining and dining potential dates, he'd chosen to spend the last couple of weeks with me.

"Something on your mind, Kai?"

I rolled to my back, mortified he'd felt my attention on him. "No, I—"

Lucien turned his head, but I couldn't see his eyes behind those dark lenses. "You…?"

I paused for a second, and then thought, *When in Monaco*… "I was just looking at you."

Lucien pulled off his glasses, revealing his dark eyes, and for the first time in a long time, my cock began to throb.

"And do you like what you see?"

I swallowed. "Yes. I like it a whole lot."

"Well then." He winked and put his sunglasses back on, then slipped his hands up behind his head. "Don't let me stop you."

His confidence and charm was so damn sexy, but at the same time immediately put me at ease, and a chuckle bubbled out of me. I rolled onto my side to continue my perusal, and just when I didn't think he could get any more outlandish, Lucien said, "Would you like me to take my shirt off?"

Before I could even answer, he did just that, and I decided right then that Lucien was right. This was indeed a little slice of paradise.

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LUCIEN

THE ONSITE CHEF prepared an exquisite meal, giving Kai his first taste of barbagiuan. To say the ricotta and chard pastry was a hit was an understatement, and I asked the chef afterward for a repeat before we headed back to the States.

"These might be my new favorites. Lots of room for all the amazing food here," Kai said, snapping the elastic waist of the loose linen pants he wore before falling onto the couch.

"I'm glad you like them." I lowered my eyes over the way the cream material sat low on his hips, offering up a sliver of skin beneath his navel. "You wear them well."

He turned his head on the cushion, and I did nothing to hide my perusal. The way he'd watched me earlier told me something had shifted here, and I welcomed his curiosity—and interest, if it came to that.

One side of his lips curved up slowly as he met my stare. "See something you like?" he teased, throwing back my words from earlier.

I nodded. "I do. I see a beautiful man finally enjoying what the world has to offer."

His pointer finger traced the patterns in the couch, but his eyes stayed on mine. "Thanks to you."

"Enjoy yourself, Kai. That's why we're here."

"I think—" His words were cut off with a yawn, jet lag catching up with him.

Chuckling, I stood and grabbed a blanket off the back of the couch. “Time for bed. Let me know if you get lost on the way back to your room. I’ll be just outside.”

Kai sat up as I headed for the back. “Wait, where are you going?”

“It’s a nice night. I thought I’d sleep under the stars.”

“Really?”

“Really.” I paused by the door. “Would you like to join me?”

He shot up off the couch, stopping to grab another blanket, and then followed me out to the backyard.

The view here always took my breath away, and as I led him around the pool and across the pristine lawn, Kai hurried to keep up.

“We aren’t sleeping by the pool?”

“You can. But personally, I like to sleep here.” We rounded the manicured hedges that ran along the property line, and when he saw the bluff overlooking Cap Ferrat, Kai dropped his blanket on the enormous daybed facing the peninsula.

“Oh. My. God.” He walked across the thick grass to where a couple of torches flickered at the edge. “Is there any part of this place that doesn’t look like a postcard?”

“Not that I’m aware of.” I moved to stand beside him, looking down at the lights of the yachts and sailing boats anchored for the night.

“It doesn’t seem real. Do you ever get used to it?”

“No. And if I did, I wouldn’t be deserving of standing here.”

Kai nodded. “I think you’re very deserving.”

“Oh? What makes you say that?”

“I don’t know, just a feeling I get. Plus…” He turned back to look at the view. “You’ve been so good with me. I hardly think I’m the first.”

I gently brushed the back of my hand against his and smiled.

“You’re the first I’ve stood with here like this.”

Kai swallowed, his eyes dropping to my mouth, but I took a step back before I did something careless. The last thing I wanted was to push him into something he didn’t even realize he was asking for.

“Take as much time as you like.” I stretched out on the daybed and winked at him. “Just don’t forget to look up.”

Just as I hoped, he did just that and gasped.

With no city lights to mute the glow, stars glittered across the night sky, much like the boats on the dark water below.

“There’s so many of them. I mean, they’re just so clear. It’s like you could reach out and touch them.”

“I know what you mean.” I beckoned him closer. “If you lie back, I’ll show you where Perseus is.”

Kai’s face brightened and he moved to the other side of the bed and lounged back beside me.

“Okay, the easiest way to spot it is to look for Cassiopeia first. It looks like a W.” I leaned closer to him, pointing out the distinct pattern. “Do you see?”

“Yes,” Kai said, excitement lacing his voice as he nodded and shifted even closer. He traced the formation in the air. “There. Right?”

“Right. And see that bright yellow star?”

“I think so—oh yeah, there it is.”

“And the one near it that looks like it’s blinking?”

He moved up as though he could see it better if he got closer. “I see it!”

“They’re all part of Perseus, which was named after the Greek mythological hero who killed Medusa.”

Kai glanced back at me, a cute little grin on his lips.

“What?”

“You would’ve been a good teacher, you know that?”

“A teacher?”

“Uh huh. You’re full of all these amazing facts and seem to love learning and reading.”

“Maybe so. But I’m not sure any teacher I know would be allowed to talk about ancient butt plugs.”

A burst of laughter left Kai. “Yeah, you’re probably right. Plus, you’re too good looking to be a teacher.”

“Oh? Do say more.”

Kai flopped back down to his side of the bed. “Nope, that’s all you’re getting. Now be quiet—I’m looking at the stars.”

I smiled to myself and also went back to enjoying the view, both in the sky and beside me. A sense of contentment filled me as I listened to the soft waves crash into the cliffs below.

I was just about to drift off when I heard, “You know, never in my wildest dreams could I have imagined ending up in a place like this.”

I turned my head on the pillow to see Kai staring up at the stars, a wistful expression on his face. My first instinct was to reach out to him, to

assure him that this was most certainly real and he was here.

"I used to live under a bridge in Brooklyn—did I tell you that?"

He definitely had *not* told me that, because the idea of Kai shivering under some bridge in the cold night made me feel fucking murderous.

Not wanting to alarm him when he was opening up to me, I did my best to keep my voice neutral when I responded, "No, you didn't." *Breathe. Don't freak him out.* "I'm sorry you had to live like that."

"Why?" Kai turned to look at me. "It's not your fault."

No, it was his no-good parents' fault. *Fifteen.* That was how old he'd said he was when they kicked him out, and as I lay there beside him, staring at his perfect face, all I could think about was how much I would give to have a moment alone with them.

How could they have kicked out their own child? How could they live with themselves not knowing if he was alive and well?

"I know that," I said, shifting onto my side so I could slide my hand under the pillow. The last thing Kai needed to see was my clenched fist. "That doesn't mean I'm not sorry for what you went, through."

He shrugged it off as though it was nothing. But his tight, thin smile told me something altogether different. It was such a contrast to the joyous expression he'd had when searching out patterns in the stars.

It was fucking heartbreaking.

"They didn't like having a gay son," he said, and went back to looking at the night sky. "And since nothing was going to change that fact, the best way to fix the problem was to get rid of it."

I'd had my suspicions as to why Kai was kicked out, but hearing him talk so calmly about it, so matter-of-factly, made some untamed part inside me claw to get free. I wanted to hunt down his parents and tear them apart.

"What did you do?"

I wasn't sure if he would answer, or if that was all he wanted to say on the matter. But I had to ask. I needed to know what had molded the brave boy beside me, and I wanted him to feel safe telling me—even the hard, ugly parts.

"I ran." Kai swallowed. "I ran and never looked back. I had no idea where I was going—all I knew was that I couldn't go home."

"What about friends? Other family?"

"Had none of those. The kids at school treated me like a freak, ostracized me, and we had no family living nearby that I knew of—those

first few weeks were the hardest. Trying to find somewhere safe to sleep. I was always so worried someone would—" He shook his head. "I didn't get much sleep. I don't think I've had a really good night's sleep until your place."

I swallowed back a growl, and thank God Kai wasn't looking at me, as there was no telling what my expression would've relayed. It didn't take a genius to guess why someone like Kai hadn't felt comfortable falling asleep in the streets. Young, beautiful, and alone? He would've been the perfect target for predators. I wanted to take him in my arms and promise he'd never have to feel any of those things again.

He'd been through more than most would in their life, and yet come out on the other side of it in one piece. I still didn't know how he'd ended up with Rupert, but that was a question for another night. Kai's current silence was a good indication that he was done talking for now.

"You will *always* have a safe place to sleep at my house. No matter what. Do you hear me?"

Kai glanced over at me, his cheek wet from a lone tear that had fallen. "I hear you."

"Good." I reached out and brushed my thumb over his damp skin. "Thank you for sharing your story with me."

"Thank you for reminding me how to smile again."

I wasn't sure how long I lay there watching him after that, but as Kai's eyes drifted shut and his breathing evened out, I pulled a blanket over him and made a promise to myself.

No matter where I was or what I was doing, I would make sure Kai Daniels smiled at least once a day for the rest of his life.

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LUCIEN

THE MORNING BROUGHT a sweet surprise in the form of Kai curled into me on the daybed. His head rested in the crook of my shoulder, his fingers clutched at my shirt, and his left leg was intertwined with mine.

Not that I was any better. My arms were firmly wrapped around him, holding him tight to me. Somehow, we'd started out on opposite sides only to find our way to each other during the night.

An unexpected sense of rightness filled me as I took in the moment. It wasn't just waking up to such a beautiful view—blue skies, the sun sparkling off the water, and a perfect breeze blowing. It was the trust I'd gained from the beautiful soul I held in my arms, who subconsciously wanted me close. Who'd opened up to me last night, let me safeguard his secrets.

I wanted to give him the world. To make up for lost time and show him there was more good out there, more to enjoy and experience than the struggles he'd been through in his young life. And while I told myself I'd do it for anyone, I knew that wasn't true. Kai was different. Special. I knew it the moment I saw him.

As a warm breeze swept across us, Kai's soft strands tickled at my neck, and I closed my eyes and took full advantage of this peaceful moment while I could.

I'd lived a privileged life, a wild and exciting existence where I couldn't even imagine, only empathize with, what Kai had experienced. I had secrets

of my own I couldn’t necessarily share, not without revealing the extent to which the Kings and I wheeled and dealed behind the scenes. As it was, he already knew more about Libertine, having been there, than he should. I’d never brought anyone else into my private world, but I found that with Kai, I was willing to share. Especially when he continued to open up to me.

His fingers tightened in my shirt and then slowly relaxed. I pressed a kiss to his forehead, hoping to ease any bad dreams he might be having, but it had the opposite effect, and Kai’s eyes fluttered open.

Watching him sleep was an appealing sight, but it was nothing compared to the way he looked when his eyes were on me.

He gave a contented smile—*first smile of the day complete*—but it only lasted a heartbeat before his entire body went rigid. My arms were still around him, and I rubbed his back in a soothing motion to show him this was okay, but apologies were already flying off his tongue.

“I’m so sorry, I didn’t mean to—”

“Kai, don’t apologize.”

He tried to lift himself up, but I held his chin between my thumb and forefinger so he had to look at me. I wanted him to hear me and know I meant it when I said this.

“I want you here.”

“You…you do?” Kai bit the inside of his cheek, a habit he seemed to have when he was nervous…or trying to hide a smile. In this case, it was the latter.

He lay back down, relaxing into me with his head against my shoulder, and for a long time we stayed just like that, listening to the birds chirping overhead and letting the sun bathe us in its golden light. All the while, I breathed him in, content to lie here just like this without wanting more. Even though my morning wood ached at having him this close, there was no need to rush anything, not until—or if—he ever wanted to take things further. If he wanted to be mine.

And if he didn’t? This moment was still fucking perfect.

“I was thinking,” I said, “that if you’re up for it, we could spend the day indulging in the luxury of the city.”

Kai’s chuckle vibrated against me. “I can’t even begin to figure out what you mean by that.”

“Then I guess you’ll have to trust me to show you a good time. Can you do that?”

He grinned. “If it’s with you, definitely.”

BY “LUXURY OF the city,” I meant pampering to the extreme. After starting things off with a Michelin-starred breakfast, I took Kai to the grandest hotel in Monaco, where we indulged in twenty-four-karat facials and Ayurvedic treatments that included warm herbal oil to clear the chakras—something I’d discovered on a trip to the Himalayas once—before rounding things off with four-handed massages and a bath soak.

Was it over the top? Abso-fucking-lutely. But he already knew that about me, so why expect anything less at this point?

Thoroughly relaxed and reenergized—*jet lag*, *begone*—we headed to the Promenade for lunch and shopping. The first stop was for something I should’ve done back in Manhattan, which was getting Kai a cell phone. It was the first time he put up any kind of disagreement, saying he didn’t need one, but when I mentioned it would be easier, and safer, if we could have contact no matter where we were, he reluctantly agreed.

“Are you tired yet, or ready for more?” I asked as we stepped out onto the packed Promenade.

“Not tired,” he said, shaking his head. “What would you like to do?”

I gave him a mischievous smile and winked before heading to just the spot. There’d been no need to call ahead, not when I was one of their elite clients. I’d barely touched the buzzer before we were ushered inside one of the most prestigious designer shops on this side of the Atlantic. I glanced at Kai as we were led past elaborate displays of the latest designs, straight off the runway, and watched his face light up as he took it all in.

Even as I wanted to share my world with him, I couldn’t help but hope this wasn’t too much. I kept careful watch with every place we entered, making sure he was never uncomfortable. Wanting to spoil him was just as much for me as it was for him, and I had a feeling he understood that, and that was why he continued to humor me.

I also hoped it was because he was enjoying himself.

Kai stopped in front of a mannequin on a pedestal dressed in a black one-piece suit with the shirt cut down past the chest. He reached out to finger the fabric but pulled his hand back.

“You would look amazing in this,” he said.

The fact that he pictured me and didn’t want it for himself was a hot surprise, one I was more than willing to accommodate.

“Oh yeah? Should I get it?”

“Well…” He looked back at me with one side of his lips kicked up. “Maybe you should try it on first.”

“I see,” I said, strolling toward him. “If you want a show, Kai, all you have to do is say so. I’m happy to oblige.”

The look he gave me from under his lashes wasn’t shy but teasing. “I mean, I wouldn’t say no. It’s a hot outfit.”

I laughed as I gestured for our escort to come back and put the clothes in a private dressing area. “It’s the outfit that’s hot, is it? Guess we’ll have to see about that. Is there anything else you want to see?”

Kai’s eyes twinkled and then he took off, exploring every corner of the shop and choosing different outfits for me.

“And to think I brought you here so *you* could choose for yourself,” I said. “Since you’ve been stuck with clothes I’ve chosen for you.”

“But I love what you’ve chosen.” He rubbed the sleeve of his shirt like he enjoyed the feel of it against his skin.

“I’m happy to hear it. I’d enjoy seeing what you would choose for yourself too. No pressure.”

To my utter delight, he found several options for himself to go along with the massive amount he’d picked out for me. Several racks filled the private dressing room, along with mirrors to show off every angle. No harsh fluorescents here, only lighting made to enhance.

A plush cream armchair with a gold brocade design sat off to the side for viewing. Kai lingered in the entryway, and I gestured to the chair.

“Your seat, sir.”

He chuckled, and as he sat down, his feet dangled slightly off the ground.

What a cute little king he makes.

“You requested a show, I believe?” I said.

“Well, I—” He looked around the room. “I just wanted to see you in that outfit, that’s all.”

“Oh.” I took said outfit off the rack and hung it on the hook by one of the mirrors. “Then let me give you what you want.”

I kicked out of my shoes and reached for the clasp of my belt to unfasten it.

“Um, what are you doing?”

“I have to take *off* my clothes to put on the jumpsuit.”

Kai’s mouth started to move, but when nothing came out, I grinned.

“Words, Kai. You have to say them out loud if you want me to hear them.”

“You’re… You plan to undress, right here?”

I unzipped the pants and shoved them to my feet, then winked at him. “Yes.”

Kai’s eyes popped wide as I straightened in my black button-up shirt and briefs and hung my pants on a hook at the end of the rack.

“Oh, I didn’t mean— I can go and let you—”

“Kai?”

“Yes?”

“Do you want to go?”

He slicked his tongue along his lower lip, his eyes trailing down my body to where I was starting to unbutton my shirt, and shook his head.

“Then stay. I won’t tell anyone.”

Kai’s cheeks went scarlet as he shifted back in the seat and crossed his legs.

Oh yeah, there you go. Get comfortable.

Buttons undone, I shrugged out of my shirt and didn’t miss the soft sound from opposite me. Not wanting to make Kai feel self-conscious, I reached for the jumpsuit and took it off the hanger.

I stepped into the outfit, and as the silky-soft material molded to my body, a low moan of approval left my throat. It fit me to absolute perfection, but I expected nothing less from the staff of such a high-end store. They could look at a person and know their measurements in seconds. As I moved in front of the mirror and fastened the outfit, I caught Kai’s eyes locked on my ass.

“So? What do you think?”

His head jerked up, his eyes immediately finding mine in the mirror.

“Um, looks good.”

“Just good, huh? That’s disappointing. Maybe I should try on something else…”

“No, no, don’t do that.”

I turned around to face Kai, slipping my hands into the pockets, and just as I’d hoped, Kai’s eyes slid down to my waist.

Up until now, I’d done everything I could to keep my attraction for him under wraps. But with a familiar hunger flickering in his eyes, I was going

to let him look his fill and decide how *he* wanted to proceed.

"Can you come a little closer?"

"Your wish is my command." I started forward, and Kai shifted to the edge of his seat. "Close enough?"

Kai glanced up at me, and thank fucking God, because if he'd kept his eyes at waist level he would've gotten a whole other kind of show. This newfound confidence of his was making my dick hard.

"Perfect." Kai got to his feet, and then shocked me by reaching out and putting his hand on the ruched silk cummerbund. "It looked so silky, I wanted to feel it," he whispered.

My erection throbbed at the way he was looking at and touching me, and while I knew he wasn't overtly *trying* to come onto me, my poor, confused cock had no clue.

I reached for Kai's hand and moved it up over my chest, away from temptation.

"Touch me all you like. It's one of the reasons I spend what I do on clothes. The way they feel against my body."

He flattened his fingers against my chest and swallowed.

I'd thought letting him touch me there would mean less temptation, but I was wrong. It wouldn't matter where he put his hands on me, or if he did at all. All he had to do was look at me.

"Feels so good," he said softly, running his hand down over me. When he brushed over my sensitive nipple, I tensed as the sensation shot straight to my dick. Kai's eyes flashed up to mine. "I'm sorry—"

"Don't be sorry." I covered his hand with mine. "Trust me, this is more than okay."

And it was. I loved seeing this side of Kai. He was extremely tactile, seeming to love the feel of different fabrics on his skin as well as on others'. He also seemed to crave the touch of another, which was unexpected, considering everything he'd been through.

I didn't miss the heat in Kai's eyes as I dropped my arm and let him continue to peruse. He'd flipped the playbook on me already. Here I thought I'd be sitting back with a drink in hand, watching him enjoy having personal shoppers at his beck and call and trying on the gorgeous clothes, but Kai had surprised me. I never would've guessed he'd want to be the voyeur in this scenario, and that was an intriguing development.

“You should get this one,” he said. Soft fingers trailed down the opening of my shirt before he took a step back—and I’d be damned if he wasn’t packing an erection that made my mouth water.

With flushed cheeks, he moved back to sit on his throne, but he was fully aware I’d noticed.

And damn. Just damn.

As he adjusted himself to cover what he had no hope of hiding, he nodded at the all-white ensemble on the rack. “Now how about you try on that one?”

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15

KAI

I NEEDED TO pick a room in the mansion to store the beautiful clothes I'd walked away with after an epic day of shopping and spa treatments. I chose one with a view of where we'd spent last night, on the cliffs overlooking the sea.

Today had been the most spectacular day of my life. The last twenty-four hours had been like something out of a dream, and as I hugged one of the plush sweaters and fell back on the bed, I tried to think of a way I could say thank you to Lucien.

He'd given me what I longed for: safety and someone who seemed to genuinely care that I existed in the world. I hadn't done anything to deserve that, but Lucien gave it freely anyway. Because that was just the kind, generous person he was.

Not to mention, the man was seriously hot.

I could admit it. I had to after blatantly ogling him in the dressing room. There was no way to hide the reaction my body had to him, and I knew he'd seen my hard-on.

That was only natural, though, with a man who looked like Lucien, and he knew it. That was why he was so confident. I would be too if I was *that* undeniably sexy. He didn't hesitate getting naked so I could look at him, not when we'd been lounging by the pool or during today's fashion show. Those mirrors did an incredible job of showcasing every angle of Lucien in those tight black boxer briefs, and that wasn't an image I'd be able to get out of my mind, ever.

Even thinking about it now had my cock stirring. I wondered what it would be like if he slipped those briefs off too. Every inch of him I'd seen was perfect, so tanned and strong, with dark hair across his chest that I wanted to run my fingers through. It'd be the same below his hips—

With a groan, I tossed the sweater aside and stared up at the ceiling.

I couldn't remember the last time I'd looked at a man with any kind of desire. I'd been going through the motions for so long that I'd forgotten what it felt like to be turned on. Attracted in such a heady way it took over my body.

Was he feeling the same? Sometimes when he looked at me I thought I could feel it, the same desire that was coursing through me. He'd had every opportunity to act on it, though, so either he didn't want me that way, or he was being respectful. The latter seemed more like Lucien. And he *had* kissed me back the night I cleaned his cuts.

Not to mention I'd woken up this morning in his arms…

I sat up and reached for one of the shopping bags. I hadn't tried on much at the shop, but there was something out of my comfort zone that I'd gotten that I had a feeling Lucien would enjoy.

An idea even *more* out of my comfort zone had me heading to the en suite to take a quick shower. A tangle of nerves churned in my stomach as I put on the outfit and studied my reflection in the mirror.

Objectively, I thought I looked pretty good. The material clung to my body like it was made for me, and it showed off just enough skin that Lucien would get a clue I wasn't wearing it just for me.

I ran my fingers through my damp hair, shaping the waves a little more and ignoring the second thoughts that invaded my brain. That this was a mistake, that he'd turn me down.

It's just a thank you. He can't turn down a thank you.

I checked Lucien's room first, but it was empty and music drifted down the hall, coming from somewhere downstairs. With a deep breath, I headed that way, trying for the confidence Lucien had in spades. He always held his shoulders back and had that look that said he knew every single person in the room wanted him.

I wouldn't be going that far, but I did stand up a little straighter. To show off the outfit to its best advantage and all.

With a final *go get him* cheer to myself, I stepped into the room the music was coming from and saw a pool table, bar, and a couple of clubman

chairs facing doors that opened onto the patio area.

The lights were set low, and I saw the back of Lucien's head where he sat staring out at the glistening water of the pool. I shook out my hands, keeping them loose, and made my way inside and around the pool table.

I spotted a glass of alcohol in one of his hands and made a split-second decision to reach out and trace a finger down his arm where it rested on the chair.

Lucien turned to look in my direction, and a smile slowly curved his full lips.

"Good evening…"

"Evening," I said, continuing past him. His dark eyes drifted down to the sleeveless, high-collared lace top and the black pants that had been tailored specifically for me.

He ran his index finger along his bottom lip as he gave me an appreciative once-over I felt everywhere. "Is it not a good one?" he asked. "Because from here, it seems exceptional."

That was exactly what I wanted to hear, and it was all the permission I needed to make a move.

I stepped in between his thighs, enjoying the way he had to crane his neck back to look at me when usually the roles were reversed.

That sexy smile didn't dim as he arched a brow. "What's this about?"

All the nerves I'd felt on the way down here were gone now, replaced with a burning hunger.

Looks like I need to be clearer.

I reached for his hand and placed it on my body, within easy access of my zipper.

"Does this feel as good to you as it does to me?"

Lucien squeezed my hip. "It definitely fucking does."

Covering his hand with my own, I moved it down so that he could feel my growing erection. "I want to thank you for today."

I was past the point of being shy about this. I had Lucien's hand on my cock, and he wasn't pulling away.

"I'd say you're welcome, but…" Lucien ran his thumb along the sensitive underside of my shaft under the pants. "I'm starting to feel like I should say thank *you*, for finally showing me one of the outfits you picked out."

"This one's my favorite," I said. "It's so proper and still so…"

“Risqué?” Lucien curled his fingers a little tighter around me. “Is that how you’re feeling, Kai? A little risqué?”

I slid my hand down over my chest to where my nipple was rubbing against the lace. “I…I told you, I just want to thank you.”

Lucien’s eyes glittered dangerously, and while that look would’ve had me backing up a week ago, it now had my pulse racing. Then he let me go, drained his drink, and slowly got to his feet.

“That’s the second time you’ve said that since you walked out here.” My breath caught as the front of his shirt brushed over the lace covering me. “Why do you think you need to thank me?”

My cheeks flushed under his touch as I tried to think of an answer. But with his fingers gently grazing my jaw, I was finding it difficult to remember how to breathe, let alone speak.

“Kai? I asked you a question.”

I wasn’t sure what it was, but something in Lucien’s tone seemed to change in that moment. Something that made every single instinct in my body respond. He’d gone from relaxed and interested to the man I’d seen that first night, watching me from his throne at The Veil.

“You’ve been so good to me. Generous to a fault. Shared your home, food…*private jet*. So I was trying to think of something I could do for you.”

Lucien cocked his head to the side. “I told you, I don’t do those things expecting anything in return.”

“I know.”

“*Do* you?”

I swallowed and nodded.

“I don’t know. This feels very much like you think I expect this from you. That you’re *thanking* me because you think you have to—”

“That’s not it at all,” I blurted.

“No?”

“No. I was trying to think of something I had to give, and, well, I don’t have anything. But I’m not doing this because I think you expect it. I’m doing it because I…I want to pleasure you.”

Lucien hummed, and the sound was so damn hot it made my knees buckle as he lowered his face over mine. I took hold of his shirt, just to make sure I didn’t end up on my ass, then he ghosted his lips over mine and said, “Tell me something, beautiful boy—has anyone ever pleasured *you*?”

I blinked at him, his sinfully sexy face making my mind blank.

Pleasure *me*? What was he talking about? I wanted to thank *him*.

"Kai?"

There he went again, saying my name in that new tone. The one that felt intimate, personal. My body instantly responded, my cock throbbing in anticipation of what *might* happen if I was brave enough to answer.

Knowing it was now or never, I shook my head, my heart thundering so hard that I was surprised Lucien couldn't hear it. But then his lips crooked into a devilish smile, and he wrapped his arm around my waist and hauled me up his body as if I weighed no more than a feather.

"Then this is how you can thank me," he said, turning and heading for the door.

With my legs wrapped around his waist and my arms circling his neck, I'd never been so close to Lucien. "How?" I asked.

"You can let *me* pleasure *you*."

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16

LUCIEN

IT HAD ONLY been a matter of time until Kai made his move—I just hadn't expected it *tonight*. He'd known exactly what he was doing by putting on that lacy, see-through shirt and showing himself off in front of me. Every inch of his outfit was tailored to his slim build, showcasing his beautiful body to its best advantage, and I wanted to both enjoy the view and peel those clothes off him slowly.

His hot breath against my neck as I carried him up the stairs to my room made my dick so hard it practically punched through the confines of my pants, but it was the way I could feel his own erection pressed up against my stomach that was making it difficult to walk.

With Kai tightly wound around me, I kicked the door to my room open and dropped him onto the mattress.

Stepping back, I stared down at him, at how breathtaking he was on my bed, his eyes heavy with arousal and his cock straining against his pants. It wouldn't be for long, and my mouth watered as he lowered his hand down his chest…then over his stomach…and finally over his dick.

"Did I say you could touch yourself?"

Kai stopped moving, but when he didn't take his hand away, I leaned over him, grabbed his wrists, and pinned them above his head.

"Be a good boy and keep them here, and I won't have to restrain you."

He slipped a hand free of my grip. "You can. If you want."

Fuckin' hell. The little minx wanted it. Or at least was interested enough to try.

He brushed his fingers over his erection again, and there he went, trying to seduce me. What he didn't realize was he didn't have to *try*—he already had my full attention.

Smirking at the way he wanted to push me, I went over to the bureau and pulled out one of the carefully rolled ties.

Sliding the silk through my fingers, I put a knee on the bed and said, "Since you insist."

Tonight was about pleasuring Kai, and if this was something he was curious about, I wanted him to feel that he could explore it with me.

I tied his wrists together and pinned his joined hands over his head before leaning down to brush my lips over his. They parted instantly, wanting more, and I couldn't stop myself from diving into that sweet mouth for a taste.

Keeping his hands where I wanted them, he lifted up into me, chasing the kiss. Greed and hunger overtook my self-control, and I slid my tongue past his full lips. He moaned into my mouth, or hell, maybe that was me. It was hard to tell as fireworks flashed behind my eyes and heat raced up my arms.

The feel of Kai's mouth was fucking heaven. All the weeks of shy looks and simmering sexual tension exploded in that kiss, leaving us both breathless.

When I finally pulled back, he sucked in a huge gulp of air, and the wonder on his face as he said, "Damn," had a wicked smile curling my lips.

Snaking my hand down between us, I flipped open the clasp at his pants and lowered the zipper. "Will you let me touch you, Kai?"

He nodded, still breathing hard. "Yes."

In one quick move, I had him naked from his hips down.

Fuck. I tensed with need as my eyes roamed over his body. I'd kept his shirt on because he looked so goddamn lovely, and that had been the right move. Splayed out across my bed, hands tied over his head, those full lips swollen and parted, and his exquisite cock dripping with pre-cum, I'd never seen a more stunning sight in my life.

I skimmed my hands up his legs, leaving goosebumps in their wake. "Will you let me *taste* you, Kai?"

He trembled beneath me, but eagerly nodded. "Please."

I watched him watch me as I lowered my head and licked a path along the underside of his cock. It twitched beneath my mouth, and Kai's entire body tensed.

But I was watching him closely, clocking every reaction on his handsome face, and every one was telling me to keep going.

"Oh, I'm going to *please* you—all night," I promised, then parted my lips and got my first taste of his cock.

Fuck. I was in so much trouble.

I'd known Kai was going to be sweet, sinfully so, but I wasn't prepared for the intoxicating flavor of him that hit my tongue. Needing a deeper, more satisfying taste, I angled his shaft toward me, and Kai moaned.

My eyes drifted up over his lace-covered chest to where he was fixated on what I was doing, and when I flicked my tongue over him again, he whimpered softly.

"I fucking love that sound. Will you promise me something, Kai?"

He nodded, his chest rising and falling with every excited breath he took.

"Don't hold back. Let me hear how good you feel as you're feeling it. I *want* to hear it. How else am I going to know you want me to keep going?"

Kai swallowed and nodded again, and I arched a brow.

"I won't hold back." I tightened my fingers around his throbbing dick, and when he groaned, I growled.

"Good boy."

Jesus, he was a sight like this. Finally allowing himself to enjoy what was happening. As I lowered my head to give him even more, Kai was right there ready to take it.

He shoved off the bed and slid between my lips in one sure thrust, his thick length filling my mouth. He wanted deep, did he? I could give him that.

I took hold of his perfect ass, and when I drew my mouth off him, I relaxed my lips and throat, making sure this go around I could get his cock so deep it was knocking on the back of my fucking throat.

Kai's responding shout was loud and full of unbridled pleasure as I put everything I had into giving him the best experience of his life. He lowered his bound hands and pushed them against his stomach as he arched higher, then he thrust harder and faster between my lips and my own dick ached behind my zipper.

He was beautiful. The most exquisite work of art I'd ever seen.

His eyes were shut, his lashes brushing his smooth cheeks. His lips were parted as he moaned his pleasure, and nothing on the goddamn planet could've stopped me then from going and stealing a kiss from him.

So damn sweet...

As I leaned back, still hovering over him, Kai's eyes flew open. I studied him for a second, making sure there were no signs of fear or worry. But his flushed cheeks and blown pupils pointed to arousal—not fear.

"I thought I told you to keep these above your head, naughty boy." I took his hands and moved them back in place. "Do you know how fucking sexy you look right now?"

Kai sucked in a breath as I trailed my thumb over his slick lower lip. I told him, "Suck," and he immediately obeyed.

Damn if my dick didn't like that.

I'd had my suspicions whether Kai would be open to the kind of relationship I gravitated toward. And with every order of mine he obeyed, I was beginning to think he just might.

He was a natural sub, the instinct to please and obey so obvious to someone like me. And the idea that anyone had used and abused that side of his nature made me want to show Kai just how good his life could be with someone who understood and appreciated him.

I wanted to give him the kind of pleasure he deserved.

I wanted to show him the fucking world.

And when he looked at me from under his lashes, his cheeks hollow as he swirled his tongue around me, I rubbed my hard-on over his.

"See what you're doing to me? How hard you're making me?"

Kai nodded but didn't stop what he was doing. Instead, that cheeky boy wrapped his leg around me and rubbed his naked cock over mine.

"You're making an awful big mess of my pants," I pointed out, and pulled my thumb free. Then I leaned down and nipped at his lip. "Maybe I should just take them off."

"Yes," Kai said without hesitation, and his eagerness made me want his kiss even more.

"Yes?" I said, and slid my tongue along his lower lip.

"I'll beg if you like."

"No need this time. But I do want some kind of payment."

Before he could respond, I took his lips and slid my tongue between them. I tasted every delicious inch of his mouth, much like I had his cock, and when he joined in teasing and tormenting me into taking a deeper taste, a low growl rumbled out of my chest.

Kai was a little flirt, a tempter who was now looking at me as I climbed off the bed, making it extremely difficult to keep my promise and make this about *him*, not me.

But I wouldn't break. I'd trained under the best of them for moments like this, and a pair of sultry eyes and a full, pouty mouth would not make me crack. Even if all my instincts were screaming at me to flip that pretty boy over and mark him in the most primal way imaginable.

I took a calming breath and unzipped my pants. As the material loosened, I thought about drawing out the reveal, but not wanting him to come without my hands on him, I opted for a quick one.

I hooked my thumbs into the sides of my briefs and dragged them and my pants clear from my body. A pleasure-filled moan echoed around the room as I straightened, and when my eyes landed back on Kai, I saw him pumping his hips up in response to what he was seeing.

My boy wanted a show. He'd wanted one at the store and he wanted one now, and who was I to deny him?

I reached for the tail ends of my shirt and ripped it the fuck off of me. Kai's eyes flashed with desire before trailing down over my naked body, and when they landed on my *very* hard cock, I wrapped my hand around it and gave several rough pulls.

Kai licked at his lips, his dick jerking in response, but before this got out of control, I climbed back onto the bed and stretched out over him.

"This what you want?" I asked, planting my hands on either side of his head and aligning my cock with his.

Kai nodded, panting as I began to slowly rock my hips. Then I trailed my fingers down his lace-covered side, humming with pleasure at the feel of the delicate pattern and heated skin beneath it.

"That's it, open yourself to me," I said. Kai's eyes fluttered shut and his head fell back into the pillow, leaving his throat vulnerable and exposed. "Let me give you the kind of pleasure you deserve."

I pressed a kiss to his Adam's apple, then reached between us to wrap my fingers around his throbbing length. The second I had him in hand, he

bucked up, and I pinned him to the bed with my body and began to work his shaft up and down.

I bit and sucked at the tender flesh of his neck and collarbone as Kai writhed beneath me. His breathing came faster now, choppy and disjointed as he raced toward the release he so desperately deserved.

I wanted to feel that, wanted to experience his unraveling when he finally let go. So I brushed my lips over his and growled, “Take your pleasure, you beautiful boy. Take it, and enjoy the fuck out of it.”

Kai bowed up off the bed, angling his hips into mine, and a second later he cried out my name and buried the side of his face into the pillow. His warm cum sprayed all over my hand, cock, and stomach as he let himself fall over the edge.

It was both a glorious and tortuous sight to behold, my dick throbbing and wanting its own release. But the trust he’d shown here tonight wasn’t something I would break for a quick orgasm. No matter how badly I needed one.

Instead, I kissed his nose gently, shifted off him, and got out of bed to grab a warm washcloth. When I came back into the room, Kai was in the exact same position, legs relaxed, arms above his head, eyes shut. He looked so peaceful that for a second I thought he was asleep, until I reached for the tie around his wrists and tugged it free.

Kai’s eyes opened, and I cleaned him up and tossed the cloth into the wastepaper bin to deal with later. I gently rubbed the muscles of his arms, then brought his hands to my mouth and kissed his knuckles.

“Now that’s what I call a thank you.”

Kai gave a satisfied smile as I drew his hands to my bare chest.

“Can I… Do you mind… Can I stay here, with you?”

Something about the way he asked made me think he expected to be told to leave. That was the last thing I planned to do. But not wanting there to be any kind of miscommunication, I reached for the blanket at the end of the bed and brought it over us before wrapping my arms around him and pulling him in close.

“Of course you can,” I said, and kissed the top of his head. “*But* if you’re planning to sleep with me again, don’t think you’re going to do it all the way on the other side of the bed.”

Kai tipped his face up to mine, and I took another taste of those sweet lips.

“I like it right here,” he whispered.

“Then that’s where you should stay.” *Forever…*

Somehow I managed not to say *that* out loud. At least, I thought I hadn’t, since Kai’s heavy eyelids drifted shut. But as I lay there and listened to his breathing even out, I knew I was in a world of trouble.

Because I wasn’t sure forever would be long enough.

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17

KAI

THERE WEREN'T ENOUGH words to describe how I was feeling. Not last night, when Lucien had taken control and given me the most unreal orgasm of my life. Not when he'd held me close after until I drifted off to sleep. And not this morning, when I woke up still in his arms.

This couldn't be real life. It was never this good. Any minute now I'd wake up and face cold, hard reality. But for now I snuggled in closer, breathing in the scent of Lucien's skin and the remnants of his cologne. The combination was intoxicating, my new favorite, one I wanted burned into my memory so I'd always remember.

His fingers trailed up and down over my bare back, and I closed my eyes and enjoyed his touch. There was nothing better in the world, I was convinced of it. I didn't know how he could be so many things at once: gentle and powerful, comforting yet so damn irresistible. Now that I'd experienced both, there was no way to choose. I wanted it all, because it was the combination that made Lucien endlessly appealing. I'd simply never met anyone like him before.

Lucien's fingers found their way into my hair and massaged my scalp, and I moaned.

"This is how you wake up," I murmured, mostly to myself, but Lucien chuckled.

"You like to touch and be touched." It wasn't a question, more like he was making an observation.

He wasn’t wrong, and maybe the fact that he’d noticed should’ve made me feel embarrassed, but it was hard to feel that way when I was curled up next to him.

“I do when it’s you,” I admitted.

“*Fuck*.” He tilted my chin up so I was looking at him. “I love that.”

“Yeah?”

“There’s nothing I would enjoy more than your hands on me,” he said, leaning down to graze his lips against mine. “And mine on you.” He kissed me and then leaned back suddenly. “On second thought, maybe I can think of several things that would come close.”

“Oh, I can definitely think of something.” I grinned as I reached up to trace his lips with my index finger, remembering just how hot it had been to have his mouth exploring me…and my cock.

“You liked that, did you? Tell me what else you enjoyed.” Without warning, he caught my finger between his teeth, and then sucked it into his mouth. His tongue swirled around it, and I could feel the sensation all the way through my body, remembering how talented his mouth was at pleasuring.

Jesus. What had he asked again?

He released my finger with a pop and grinned. “You’re a fan of my tongue?”

I nodded, still mesmerized by his mouth.

“I want to hear you say it.”

Of course he did. He knew just how to push me out of my comfort zone while still making me feel safe.

“Your tongue is”—I swallowed and met his eyes—“incredible. But then, so is everything else about you.”

Lucien smiled and cocked his head to the side. “Did you enjoy what we did last night? *All* of it?”

The fact that he was asking me that like I hadn’t come all over him was laughable, but his dark eyes were telling me he was serious. He really wanted to know.

I sat up and faced him head-on so he believed me when I gave him my honest answer. The sheets fell down to my hips, but the way Lucien looked at me didn’t make me feel self-conscious. Just the opposite—it made me feel attractive. Wanted.

“Lucien, I…” Still didn’t have the words, but I tried to find them anyway. “I don’t think there’s anything we could do that I wouldn’t enjoy.”

He was right about one thing: I was definitely tactile, because I found myself lacing my fingers through his where they lay on his chest, needing that touch to make me brave.

“So to answer your question,” I continued, “yes. Last night was incredible, but—” I hesitated, not knowing how to put the rest of what I’d been thinking into words.

“But what?” When I didn’t answer, Lucien moved our joined hands up to his lips to press a kiss to my knuckles. “This only works as long as we’re honest with each other.”

“It’s just…you didn’t let me do anything for you.”

“Because last night was about you. You gave yourself to me, and that’s everything.”

“I guess. I just thought with you it would be a little different.”

Lucien laughed, his head falling back against the pillow. “Are you disappointed?”

“No,” I said, realizing how that had come out wrong. “No, that’s not what I mean. It’s just…”

He raised a brow, clearly amused.

“You own sex clubs, and you ask about safe words, and there’s all those sexual things around your house, like your swing. I thought you’d want to give out orders and…well, get something in return.”

“I see.”

“I swear I’m not disappointed, not at all, I just thought you were into that sort of thing.”

“I am,” he said, and shifted us both on the mattress so we faced each other. “But I’ll never pressure you into anything you’re not ready for or interested in. You haven’t experienced BDSM in a relationship and all that it entails. It can be intense, but it can also bring pleasure to both partners in ways you can only experience with true trust.”

“You tied my hands… Is that part of it?”

“It’s a little light bondage, yes. Blindfolds and role playing would be other examples.” He paused and watched my reaction. “How does that make you feel?”

“I think…I would try that.” I was being honest when I’d said I couldn’t imagine anything with Lucien being something I *wouldn’t* enjoy. “What

other kinds of things do you like?”

He ran his hand along my hip. “I’m a dominant. I enjoy having a submissive partner. That means something different to everyone. For me, I enjoy looking after, nurturing, and exploring my sub’s desires, both in a sexual relationship as well as outside the bedroom. Their pleasure is what fulfills and arouses me.”

That didn’t sound scary. The night I went to The Veil with Rupert, I’d been wary of what he wanted to do. Rupert was someone who always had to be in control, who was always barking orders at someone to get what he wanted. But Lucien was a dominant, and he and Rupert were like night and day.

“You look curious,” he said.

I nodded. “I am.”

“You can ask me anything.”

“Okay. So you…take care of your subs?”

“They’re my highest priority.”

I thought that over. “Does that include bringing them food? Buying them clothes?”

Lucien’s grin widened. “It does.”

He’d already done those things for me, and we weren’t even in a relationship. Maybe that meant he’d thought about it…with me?

The flutter in my stomach wasn’t from nerves, but anticipation.

“What about all those things in your club? The ropes and the whips and stuff?”

“All a part of it—*if* the sub wants it to be.”

“But what if you want it to be?”

“It’s not about me.”

My brow furrowed. “I’m confused. Why does it sound like the sub is the one in control if you’re the dominant?”

“Because they are. See? You’re catching on already.”

I studied Lucien’s strong features and wondered if he was too good to be true. He had to be.

But what if he isn’t?

“So, if you get off from the sub’s pleasure, why didn’t you come last night? I clearly enjoyed myself.”

“I remember.” Lucien’s eyes swept over me, leaving a fiery trail in their wake. “Every single detail. It took every ounce of control I possessed not to

come right along with you. But like I said, last night I wanted to give *you* something. It was about pleasuring *you*. Seeing you enjoy that for the first time was all the pleasure I needed."

I could only stare at him as his words penetrated my brain, but they didn't make sense.

"But you could have anyone," I whispered.

It was the first time I'd ever said something that made his jaw visibly clench.

"Don't do that," he said. "Don't ever put yourself down in front of me. I know exactly who I have in my bed right now, and how lucky I am you chose me."

I let his words sit with me for a minute, *trying* to believe them. I wanted to, more than my next breath, because the idea that someone as cultured and sophisticated as Lucien would want to be with someone like me, saw *potential* in someone like me, gave me the infusion of confidence I'd always been lacking. It made me think about things I'd never dared dream of.

Like the future. *My* future.

Maybe even *our* future.

It meant that all of the shit I'd been through in my life was for a reason—and that reason was now.

Feeling a bit braver, I asked, "Do you think I'd make a good submissive?"

Lucien's eyes glittered possessively as he cradled my cheek. "I think you'd make a great submissive. Your tendencies lean toward pleasing another, following instructions, and begging *ever* so sweetly for what you want. If you were with the right partner, the right dom, they'd embrace that, coax it to the surface, and delight in every new experience they could give you."

I swallowed, my pulse beating rapidly as my cock began to ache between my thighs.

"Do you want me to give that to you, Kai? Would you like to be my submissive?"

So badly I can't get the words out for fear I'll say the wrong thing.

Instead, I nodded and kissed Lucien's thumb, and the sound that vibrated out of him was like that of a contented animal.

“You just made me happier than I can ever remember being,” he said. “But if we do this, if we enter into this kind of relationship, you have to promise me something, okay?”

“Okay.”

“You have to *always* tell me how you’re feeling. That’s the only way this can work.”

I could do that. I was already doing that. Lucien made it easy to talk to him. To confide in him.

“I’ll never lie to you, and I expect the same in return. Don’t ever tell me what you think I want to hear just to please me. You have a voice here with me, always. Use it. Tell me what you like and what you don’t. And Kai?”

“Yeah?”

A shiver of anticipation ran through me as Lucien leaned forward and replaced his thumb with his lips, brushing a wicked promise of a kiss across my mouth.

“I’ll move heaven and fucking earth to give it to you.”

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18

LUCIEN

WHEN WAS THE last time I'd felt so fulfilled?

That was only one of the things on my mind as Kai and I walked hand in hand through the busy streets of Monaco. Someone in the crowd had once again handed him a little flag on a stick, and he twirled it between his fingers as I pointed out some of my favorite places in the city. Every time I visited I found something new to enjoy, but seeing things through Kai's eyes was an entirely different experience.

He was grinning broadly as the roar of cars echoed through the air, qualifying races for the Monaco Grand Prix in full swing nearby. We'd snuck a peek earlier from the top of a hill until Kai's stomach began to rumble louder than the cars and we'd stopped at a café for breakfast.

"I love it here," he announced as he watched a trio of kids chase each other with F1 replicas before disappearing around the corner. "It feels different from New York."

That made my chest tighten. Kai had only ever experienced the shit side of the city I loved so much—and that made me more determined to show him all the great things about it the second we got back.

I stroked his thumb with mine as I led us toward our next destination. "I'm glad you enjoy it here. We'll come back anytime."

Kai shook his head, but that smile never left his face. "Why do I feel like you mean that literally?"

"Because I do." I winked at him. "It's only a plane ride away."

"So you just go wherever you want, whenever you want?"

“Is there any reason not to?”

Kai squinted up at me, the sun so bright he had to shield his eyes. “No, I guess not.”

The early morning clouds had dissipated, turning the day into nothing but blue skies, and I veered us off course to grab a couple pairs of dark sunglasses before going back out.

As we headed up toward the palatial, cream-colored building lined with security at the entrances, Kai pulled on my hand.

“Wait, what’s that?”

“The Prince’s Palace.”

“Palace? As in real royalty lives there?”

“It’s the home of Monaco’s royal family, yes.”

“Oh wow.” He took in the expansive estate, making a few admiring comments as we passed. But when I led him up one of the pathways, he tugged again on my hand.

“What’s wrong?”

“Um, I don’t think we’re allowed to just walk up here.”

“Why not?”

“Those security guys, for one thing.”

“Well, I’m sure they do a great job of keeping out the nefarious types. We, on the other hand, are meeting someone for lunch.”

Kai’s mouth fell open as I led us to one of the gates. We were immediately let in, and his jaw dropped even further.

“What is happening right now?” he whispered. “You know the royal family? Oh God, are *you* royalty?”

I laughed at the thought. Wouldn’t that be a riot? A royal sex club owner. I could only imagine the headlines.

“I can assure you that’s *not* the case. We’re just meeting up with a friend of mine.”

“A *friend*?” he squeaked, but he clamped his mouth shut as we bypassed the palace and found our way into the garden instead. The stone pathway was shaded by overhanging trees and bright purple blooms, and the view overlooking the water was by far the best in the city.

At the end of the path, it opened up to a beautiful pergola with vines of roses laced through the overhead beams. A table set for three awaited us—along with the man who stood as we approached.

He took one look at me, then Kai, then our joined hands, and grinned as he shook his head.

“Lucien, you devil,” he said, then brought me in for a back-slapping hug. “How long have you been in town without telling me?”

“Longer than you. I heard you just got in last night.”

“Yeah, well.” He rolled his eyes. “I was *summoned*.”

I smirked. “Theo, this is Kai Daniels. Kai, meet Theodore Rinaldi.”

Kai’s eyes widened a fraction as he looked from the flag back to the man in front of him.

“Rinaldi? As in… Isn’t the wedding for a Prince Rinaldi?”

“My brother,” Theo said with a nod. “Me? I’m just the spare, and don’t even think about bowing.”

Kai looked at me as though I’d lost my mind, before managing to find his tongue. “Uh, it’s nice to meet you, Theodore.”

“Oh, God, don’t call me that. Too much pomp and circumstance between friends.” He held out his hand. “And I assume we *are* going to be friends, right, Kai?”

Kai’s cheeks turned pink, and I had a feeling it had more to do with Theo’s direct question than the sun.

He slipped his hand into Theo’s. “I’d like that.”

“As would I,” Theo said, then looked to me. “Plus, any friend of Lucien’s is a friend of mine.”

My eyes narrowed on the green ones twinkling with mischief.

“Il est charmant, Lucien,” Theo said in French, one of the many languages he and I spoke fluently.

“Il l'est, et il est déjà pris,” I responded, then added not to be rude and speak English so Kai could understand.

“Of course—my apologies, Kai. Sometimes I forget what country I’m in and my tongue slips.”

“Yes, well, just make sure it stays in *your* mouth during our visit.”

“Green looks good on you, my friend.” Theo winked at Kai and gestured toward the setup beneath the pergola. “Come, eat—that way, my mouth will be busy.”

“Fucker,” I muttered, but made sure to pull Kai in under my arm. I was confident in my draw here, but a prince was enough to make anyone question their appeal.

“I’m not sure if you ate or not, so I had Cook prepare one of Lucien’s favorites—pissaladière.”

I took the seat next to Kai and eyed the tasty flatbread dish in the center of the table made up of caramelized onions, anchovies, and olive oil.

“I’d love to try some,” Kai said, polite as always. “I’ve been loving the food here. The other night we had the…barbagiuan? Am I saying that right?”

“Enough that I understand what you mean,” Theo said with a grin. “Are you enjoying the villa?”

Kai’s eyes shot to mine, and I nodded, answering his unspoken question. “He’s one of the brothers I mentioned.”

“You’re probably wondering why I’d want a villa nearby when I have all this.” Theo swung his arm carelessly at the palace. “Do you have siblings?”

Kai shook his head.

“Well, if you did, you’d want an escape too.” Theo poured himself a glass of red wine and offered one to the two of us. When we declined, he set the bottle back down. “That and the fact that hundreds of tourists roam these halls every damn day. It’s so stifling.”

“Thanks for keeping your ass here this week,” I said. “I’m afraid the house isn’t big enough for the three of us.”

“Not big enough?” Kai asked, incredulous. “I could choose a different room every night for months and still never sleep in the same place twice.”

Oh, he’d be sleeping in the same place twice during this trip, all right. With *me*.

“I believe your companion means you two want some privacy.” Theo took a sip of his wine and arched a brow, as if daring me to say differently.

“That’s exactly why.”

Kai smiled shyly at me, and I rested my arm over the back of his chair, keeping him close.

Theo’s gaze darted between the two of us, and he tapped the stem of his wine glass. It’d been a while since I’d brought anyone around, and I could see the many questions he wanted to ask. I’d be getting an earful later, that was for sure.

“So,” he said, then leaned back in his chair, “not to be nosy or anything—”

I snorted. “Since when?”

He waved my words off. “What the hell happened to your face?”

My face? Oh, shit.

I’d been on such a high since landing in Monaco that I hadn’t even stopped to think about the cuts and bruising from the explosion.

“You haven’t heard?”

“Heard what? The only thing that’s been blowing up my phone lately is annoying relatives and prying reporters. You’d think this was the first wedding to ever take place from the way everyone is carrying on about it.”

Kai put the flag he’d been holding on the table as though it had just burned him, and I reached out and gave it back to him.

“Stop being such a stick in the mud,” I said to Theo. “Your country’s been waiting forever for this. What’s wrong with having a little love floating in the air?”

“I’m allergic. And it’s making me break out in hives.”

“Well, it could be worse. Your place of business could have blown up.”

Theo’s eyes narrowed as he took another look at the gash on my chin. “I assume we’re talking ‘boom’ and not ‘went viral on the internet.’”

“You assume correct.”

“What the fuck?” Theo sat up in his seat, the relaxed monarch now looking me over as if searching for any permanent damage.

“I’m fine,” I assured him. “Can’t say the same for The Veil, though.”

“Fucking hell.” Theo shook his head. “Why did no one contact me?”

“In case you haven’t noticed, your country is literally hosting a party in your family’s honor. Pretty sure King thought it best to keep you in high spirits.”

“Screw that. I would’ve been there. I could’ve helped. What do you think happened? Who was it? Did you take something that wasn’t yours?”

Kai tensed beside me, and were I not so attuned to him I wouldn’t have noticed—and, luckily for me, Theo didn’t. The last thing I wanted was for Kai to think about Rupert right now.

“A disgruntled customer. That’s all.” I slipped my hand under the table to rest it on Kai’s leg, and he curled his fingers around mine and squeezed. “King’s on it. He suggested we should get out of town for a while, just to make sure they don’t target anything else of mine.”

“Damn.” Theo blew out a breath. “Seems like both our lives are blowing up in our faces. Can’t say I’m upset to have you here, though, especially through this trying time.”

As if on cue, fireworks went off somewhere in the distance, and I arched a brow. “Yes, so trying.”

“I mean, it’s not even nighttime and they’re setting off confetti and sparklers into the sky. I don’t know how much longer I can deal with this.”

“I assume until the wedding. When is that, by the way?”

Kai picked up his flag and held it out to me. “The date’s right here.”

“Oh.” I laughed. “So a few months yet, huh?”

“You know what, fuck you, Vale,” Theo said. “I was going to offer you the royal yacht this weekend for the big race. But I’m thinking that you should just watch it from the sidelines with the rest of the crowd.”

“No you’re not.”

Theo pursed his lips, then grinned. “No, I’m not. Plus, I like Kai, and he deserves to experience Monaco’s number one day in the most outlandish way possible. Despite your horrible manners.”

Kai laughed joyously as he looked between the two of us. “Are all your brothers as over the top as you both are?”

I eyed Theo with a smirk and mouthed *thank you* as he saluted us with his wine glass. Then I pressed a kiss to Kai’s cheek and said, “Every single one of them. Now come on—you have to try some of this pissaladière.”

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KAI

OUR JAM-PACKED SCHEDULE, along with the delayed jet lag, finally caught up with me the next day, and we decided to stay close to the villa for most of it. Swimming, relaxing, napping. The last because I was *sure* that heading to the yacht that evening would lead to a night I'd want to be very awake for.

Hours later, I found I was right.

With a view of the Circuit de Monaco that would be perfect for the main event tomorrow, we anchored alongside the many yachts and boats off the Mediterranean coastline. The difference, though, was the sheer size of the royal yacht, not to mention the wide berth security required to prevent anyone from coming near—even though it was just the two of us with a small crew that kept mostly out of sight.

I stood at the railing and looked up at the stars, trying to find the ones Lucien had pointed out to me. I bet if I asked nicely, he'd show me a few more, but I wasn't feeling quite so…*nice* this evening. In fact, I'd put on a G-string from the designer we'd visited a couple of days ago, and I didn't think Lucien had noticed it in the pile when he told the shop staff to ring it all up. It was a surprise *for* him, after all, and I couldn't wait to see his face when he unwrapped me later.

Hopefully not *too* much later.

"Did you find Perseus yet?" Lucien said as he strolled onto the deck and joined me.

I pointed at the ones I thought were right, and he braced his hands on the railing, caging me in. Then he pressed a kiss against my neck.

“Good boy.” The deep rumble of his words had a seductive tone that sent a shiver of desire through me. “Can I reward you with an exquisite dinner for two?”

I turned to face him. “Are *you* on the menu?”

“Do you want me to be?”

“Oh yes.”

“I see.” Lucien gave me a smile so sexy that my cock took notice. “So what you’re saying is, you want dessert first.”

I wasn’t usually so forward, but after the last few days I’d become somewhat obsessed with the idea of getting naked with Lucien again. It was his own fault. Ever since he’d brought up the dom/sub conversation with me, I’d found myself studying every single move he made, and that had just made me want him even more.

“I’d *love* dessert first,” I said, and slid my hands over his chest so there was no mistaking what I meant.

Lucien took my chin between his thumb and forefinger and angled my face up to his. The flirtatious man from seconds ago was replaced with a sinfully serious one.

“To be clear, you want to have sex.”

Well, that was to the point.

“Kai?”

I swallowed. *Words, Kai, use your words.*

“Yes. I want to have sex. With you.”

Lucien’s grin was downright rakish. “Thank God for that. Otherwise I might’ve jumped off the fucking boat.”

I chuckled until Lucien’s mouth grazed mine, and then all laughter ceased.

“You need a safe word,” he said, then nipped at my lip. “Something that you’ll remember to say if you want or need to stop.”

“I won’t—”

“You *need* a safe word.”

I curled my fingers into his shirt as I stared into his eyes, and I was reminded of the night we met. The night he’d saved me. The night he’d asked for my safe word for a totally different reason.

“Monaco.”

“Monaco,” he repeated back to me. “Good boy. Use it any time you want to stop.”

I nodded, positive that word would *not* be leaving my mouth anytime this evening.

“Kai?”

“Yes, sir?” Lucien’s eyes widened a fraction, and I immediately realized my slip-up. “I’m sorry… I don’t know why I said that, I—”

Lucien put a finger to my lips. “Don’t apologize. I liked it. In fact, if you get down on your knees, you’ll see just how *much* I liked it.”

Eager anticipation had me dropping to my knees before I remembered where we were.

“Right here is perfect,” he said, like he could read my mind. “No one will see you unless you want them to.”

For a moment, I didn’t understand what he meant by that, but then I realized that he was giving me an option—keep my back against the side of the yacht, where he blocked me from view, or switch places and we’d both risk being seen. I needed to remember to ask him if that was one of the preferences he felt strongly about. For now, though, I was happy right where I was: with Lucien’s cock all to myself.

Well, once I got his pants down.

I’d been wanting a taste of him for too many nights to count, and as I lowered his pants and briefs and his long, thick erection came into view inches from my face, I couldn’t believe how lucky I was.

I’d never wanted to get my lips around anything more, and when Lucien threaded his fingers through my hair and demanded, “Suck me, Kai,” I didn’t hold back.

I wrapped both my hands around him, one at the base and one mid-shaft, and brought his tip to my mouth. When I pressed a kiss to the head, his pre-cum painted my lips, and I licked it off, making sure to look up at Lucien when I did.

He watched me with hunger, and his fingers tightened in my hair.

And then it was on.

It didn’t matter that anyone could see us; all that mattered right now was giving Lucien the same mind-blowing pleasure he’d given me.

I flicked my tongue over his slit, teasing and tasting at the same time, and God, Lucien was hands down my new favorite dish. Forget any of that other stuff I’d tried. Nothing would beat this. Not the way he felt like

smooth velvet on my tongue. Not the noises he made to let me know he was enjoying this. And definitely not the feel of his impressive length in my mouth as I took him as far as I could.

One of Lucien's hands were the size of both of mine, but I put them to good use, jerking him off once I got him nice and wet all over. Then I sucked him into my mouth again, keeping pressure from my tongue tight against him, which had him reaching for the rail with one hand.

"Such a good fucking boy," he said, a little breathless.

Pride filled my chest as I swirled my tongue around his sensitive head and dove back in, even deeper this time. I would take everything he had to give and more. I *wanted* more. I wanted all of him.

The fingers in my hair loosened and trailed down my cheek. I moaned as Lucien began to massage my jaw, keeping it nice and relaxed as he continued to thrust in and out.

"This mouth…" Lucien's tone was reverent, his thought incomplete, as I slid a hand behind his thigh and up to his ass. I pulled him forward, so close that the cropped curls surrounding the root of Lucien's cock tickled my nose.

If I thought his cologne smelled amazing, his sex was a total aphrodisiac.

My dick was making a complete mess of the pretty present I'd wrapped it in for Lucien. But there was no stopping my reaction. Not when he was fucking my mouth and smelling like every fantasy I'd ever had.

I curled my fingers into his ass cheek as I greedily devoured him, and when Lucien swiped his thumb gently by my eye, I realized tears had escaped. Not tears of pain or suffering, but ones of joy at the immense fulfillment I was experiencing at finally giving pleasure to someone I wanted to, instead of performing because it was required of me.

I looked up to see his lips pulled into a hard, taut line, and to some he might look angry, but to me he looked fierce—strong, powerful, fiercely protective of me—and even now, during *his* pleasure, he was making sure that I was okay.

Not wanting him to worry, I gave a good swallow. Lucien cursed, but when my safe word remained unspoken, he took my head with both hands and showed me exactly what he wanted.

He dominated and plundered the interior of my mouth at a relentless pace that was sexy as hell. His tight control seemed to fall away at the

permission I'd given him to take me the way he wanted to.

I moaned and swirled my tongue around him as his fingers tightened at the back of my head, and when he drew me off his shaft, a string of ropey cum joined the two of us from cock to lips.

"Damn, Kai. Look at you." Lucien wrapped a fist around himself and painted my mouth with his sticky desire. Then he leaned down and licked it off my lips. "I taste really fucking good on you. But I think it's time to find out if I'd feel really good *in* you."

"Yes, sir," I panted, gripping my dick. His words threatened an instant orgasm as his salty taste lingered on my tongue.

Lucien smirked at my eager response, then hauled me up into his arms and hiked his pants up over his ass. I wound my legs around his waist, and when Lucien groaned, I grinned.

"You enjoying my torture, are you?"

"Maybe a little," I said, and wriggled against his naked cock as he started across the deck, completely uncaring of his aroused state.

"I'll have to remember that when we get inside."

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LUCIEN

MY FIRST INSTINCT when Kai gave his sexual request was to take him right there on the deck. Maybe throw him on the daybed and have my way with him.

But the way he'd used that naughty tongue on me had me rethinking. It wasn't just that I wanted him all to myself without the possibility of prying eyes. It was also that I'd stashed several different implements to use if the occasion arose, and those were all tucked away in the main stateroom.

With the way Kai's curiosity prevailed, along with his ability to stoke my arousal to a fucking ten, I was already putting together a plan in my mind of just how to drive him wild.

His mouth found its way to my neck, sucking and kissing as I headed down the stairs toward our room. I turned my head, capturing his lips and groaning when I tasted myself on his tongue.

Up ahead, one of the crew members turned the corner, heading in our direction, but quickly averted their eyes and flattened themselves against the wall when we passed.

I opened the door, pushing it aside as I deepened the kiss. My cock throbbed with the need to get inside Kai, to make him mine in the way I craved.

We were both breathing hard when I pulled away to lower him to the ground. I waited until he was steady on his feet and then reached for my overnight bag.

"What's in there?"

I glanced over my shoulder, eyebrow raised. “Did I say you could speak?”

Kai clamped his teeth into his lower lip and shook his head. But there was no true upset there, as he continued to try to see into the bag I’d just grabbed.

“Curious little thing, aren’t you?”

Being a quick study, he nodded.

“That’s going to prove very useful tonight.”

The four-poster bed that connected from ceiling to floor was also going to come in handy.

I tossed the vibrating anal beads and lube onto the bed, and then pulled out two coils of bondage rope. When Kai saw me walk toward him with *that*, his eyes widened, but like the good boy he was, he didn’t say a word.

“What’s your safe word?” I said.

“Monaco.”

I nodded and gestured to the rope. “You didn’t have a great first experience with this, so we’ll take it slow. Use your safe word at any point if you want me to stop. Understood?”

“Yes, sir.”

There it was again, and I couldn’t deny that Kai uttering the word “sir” made my cock jerk.

I grabbed the long step stool I’d requested and positioned it on the floor at the halfway point of the bed, then put the rope on the mattress by the other goodies. “Step up and take off your top, beautiful.”

Kai removed his shoes and shirt then did as he was asked, and as he faced me I could feel the anticipation vibrating off him. First things first, though: those pants had to go.

I flicked open the button of his tailored black pants, the fit of the fine material doing little to hide the long, hard erection straining against the fabric. As I took hold of the zipper, Kai sucked in and held his breath.

“Let’s see what you’re hiding under here tonight.”

I unzipped his pants, and when I began to pull the material down his slim thighs, my breath caught. A lacy, rose-colored garter thong came into view, and under normal circumstances the lingerie would’ve been a sexy little peek at what lay underneath. But with Kai’s erection as hard as it was, the wispy material was a naughty surprise that barely contained the flushed dick trying to break free of the skimpy covering.

Fuck. When did he get *that*?

Not that it mattered. The fact that he had was enough to make my cock happy—so happy I was now a hairsbreadth away from losing my cool. Something I hadn't done in years. But damn if I wasn't close to coming like a geyser.

I closed my eyes for a second, somehow composed myself, then tapped one of Kai's ankles. He obeyed my silent request without question, then did the same for the other, and only after tossing the pants over the end of the bed did I finally allow myself to really look at him.

And *fuuuck*. I didn't know what I'd done in my life to deserve Kai standing in front of me like an offering wrapped in silk and lace, but I wasn't about to question it.

I gently ran the backs of my fingers down the lacy little triangle covering the front of his thigh and thanked every deity I could think of.

"Well, well, well," I said when I finally regained the use of my tongue. "Aren't *you* just full of surprises tonight."

Kai's answering smile told me my reaction was exactly what he'd hoped for. I drew my finger down to the thin edge of the garter where it circled his thigh and slid my finger under it, teasing the material back and forth as I stared up into guileless eyes.

How could someone be so sexy and yet so innocent at the same time?

"I want to tear this off you so badly right now." I eyed the lacy pouch cradling his cock, and the thin strips of pink silk that circled his hips and connected the G-string and garter with small gold rings. "But I also want to see you in it again. So I find myself in quite the predicament." I took a step back from him and gestured for him to turn. "Maybe if I see *more* of you, the decision will be easier."

That wasn't true, but I wasn't going to miss out on seeing what this beautiful boy had picked out just for me.

Kai carefully began to pivot on the stool, and when the twin globes of his ass came into view, bisected by a strip of pink lace, I gave my dick a rough stroke.

Jesus. H. Christ. How was I supposed to control myself in the face of all of that smooth, fuckable skin? I couldn't, wouldn't, and shouldn't. Kai had dressed this way for a very specific reason: to seduce. And judging by the hard-on I was trying to calm down, he'd done a damn good job.

“Nope, that didn’t help,” I said, and closed the distance between us. “The back of you is as tempting as the front. So the question remains…” I leaned in and scraped my teeth over one of his plump ass cheeks. “Whatever shall I do?”

Kai shivered under my mouth, and I grinned as I nipped at his cheek and kissed my way down to the thin edge of the garter surrounding his thigh. Then I took the silk between my teeth and tore it free, making Kai gasp.

Fuck. Yes.

Those gold eyelets securing each side of the garter were designed for easy release, and as soon as the material dangled free, I moved to the other leg.

This time I teased the silk surrounding his leg with the tip of my tongue before kissing my way up to his ass, reveling in the whimper that filled the room.

Music to my fucking ears. I reached for the garter, hooked a finger under it and pulled, biting down into his soft flesh.

Kai’s whimper turned to a moan as I released him and swirled my tongue over his kiss-bitten skin.

“I do *love* unwrapping gifts.”

I slid a finger along the silk at either side of his hips then tugged the flimsy material free. As the strips fell away and hung against his legs, I reached between them and cradled his balls in the soft lace.

“As pretty as this is, I think what’s underneath is even more stunning.”

One firm tug later and the garment was gone, leaving Kai standing before me naked as the day he was born.

“Oh yes,” I said, tossing the scrap of lace on the edge of the stool. “So fucking pretty.”

I picked up one of the soft coils of rope and looked up at Kai as I unwound it.

“Remember, you are in control. And as of now, if I ask you something, you may speak in response. Do you understand?”

Kai whispered, “Yes, sir,” then his eyes shifted to the rope in my hand.

I gently rubbed it up against his leg, and goosebumps broke out across his skin.

Good. I was going to erase that motherfucker Rupert clear out of his mind by the time I got through here tonight.

“Do you like how that feels?”

“Very much, sir.”

“That’s what I like to hear. Now, I’m going to wrap this around your ankle like this…” I carefully wound the crimson rope around his pale skin, then smoothed out the remaining length and walked over to one of the bedposts. “Spread your legs for me, Kai. Not too far, just enough that I can…get between them.”

Kai took a deep breath and parted his thighs, and I tied off the rope and moved to his other side. Once both legs were secure, I removed my shirt and pants, then stood back and looked at my handiwork—which, I had to admit, was damn fine.

The step stool put Kai at the perfect height to play with, and then…

But first things first. It was time to get my boy ready. I grabbed the bottle I’d tossed on the bed and noticed Kai’s trembling when I uncapped it.

I’d chosen a two-in-one massage/lube combo, and as I swept my gaze over his smooth, supple skin, I was really fucking happy with the decision I’d made. Kai loved to be touched, and I was going to enjoy the hell out of touching him. Something he seemed to sense as he stood patiently like a well-trained sub, instead of a fledgling, waiting for me to come and enjoy.

Or, more accurately, enjoy and *then* come.

Moving in behind him, I put my hands on his shoulders, and he let out a soft sound of pleasure.

“I’m going to make you feel things you’ve never felt before,” I said by his ear as I dug my fingers into his muscles. “You ready for that?”

Kai’s breathing came a little faster. “Yes.”

“Okay, but first, let’s see how good you are at following instructions. Put your hands behind your head. Lace your fingers.”

Without an ounce of hesitation, Kai complied.

“Very good,” I praised, then kissed his temple. “Now let’s see if I can get another *yesss* out of you.”

I straightened behind him, moving my hands down along his back, kneading and caressing the muscles as I went. Then I glided my slick palms around his waist and stepped forward, aligning my front to his back, letting him feel every naked inch of me along his lithe body.

My cock nestled into the crease of his gorgeous ass and a pleasure-filled moan echoed around the quiet room. It was the best sound I’d ever heard,

and as I kissed my way up Kai's neck, I knew I wanted to hear more, and now.

I smoothed my palms over his abs and chest. Every touch, every new sensation, caused another fantasy-inspiring sound to escape his lips. And when I reached his nipples and pinched, Kai gasped. I bit down on the tender flesh of his neck and sucked.

He bucked his hips forward, jerking against the hold I had on him as he fucked at the air, desperate for some kind of friction on his dripping cock. But not yet. That was the next lesson tonight.

"You want something to fuck, beautiful b—"

"*Yesss*," Kai said, barely letting me get the words out before he answered.

Oh yeah, he was in it now, climbing that high…

I licked over the mark I'd left, and a smug smile curled my lips at the bruise I knew I'd see there tomorrow. "I can give you that, but you don't come until I give you permission. Do you understand?"

Kai nodded, but that wouldn't do. Not for this particular rule.

"Do you understand, Kai?"

"Yes, sir."

Satisfied, I slid one of my hands down to his dick, jutting out from his body thick, hard, and flushed. Pre-cum dripped onto the bed from the tip. As soon as I wrapped my large fist around him, a long groan met my ears.

"There," I said by his ear, rubbing my own cock between his cheeks. "Now fuck it."

It was all the permission he needed. Kai's hips snapped forward, and as his shaft slipped through my slippery fist, he cursed.

That's right, gorgeous. It's nice and slick for you.

Kai's hands fell down from behind his head to reach for mine, and while I'd usually stop and punish another sub for not following my order, Kai was still learning, and this would be a good point to bring up with him later.

Plus, it was difficult to discipline him when he was holding my hands around himself and pumping his cock in and out of my palm like he would die if he didn't. The bump and grind of his hips was limited with the way his feet were tied, but that didn't take away from the intense massage his ass was giving my throbbing erection.

I lowered my head and scraped my teeth along the top of his shoulder, as his heavy breathing mixed with my own.

God, he was sexy.

I wasn't sure what I'd expected from Kai, but this uninhibited display, this sensual freedom he was showing me tonight, made every step we'd taken to build trust worth it as he put his pleasure almost literally in my hands.

But not knowing how long he could last—or how long *I* could—I loosened my grip on him.

Kai whimpered and went to reach for himself again, but I tsked. "I don't think so."

I put a hand to the middle of his back and gently urged him forward, bending him over the end of the bed.

"It's time to let that pretty cock calm down a little. This, however," I said, and ran my thumb down the crack of his ass, stopping to press against his hole, "we're going to play with."

Kai shoved back toward me. But with his feet restrained, he didn't have much room to move.

"You like that idea, I see. Well then, let's not make you wait."

I poured some lube down the shadowed cleft of his ass, and when it hit his tight entrance, he clenched.

The sight had me reaching for the head of my dick. Maybe it was me who needed to calm down. But there was no way, not when I was now face to ass with the most perfect posterior I'd ever had the pleasure of looking at.

"Hands where I can see them, Kai." As he moved his hands to rest on the mattress by his head, I reached for the anal beads. "Remember, no coming until I say so, and if you want to stop at any time, use your safe word."

"Yes, sir," he said, his voice slightly muffled by the covers.

I put the beads within grabbing distance, then took a handful of each of Kai's cheeks, plumping and kneading the pliant flesh. He moaned and shifted a little on the bed as I spread him apart, admiring the darker strip of skin that led to his waiting entrance.

I licked my lips, knowing one day soon I'd devour him there. But I didn't have the patience tonight, and right now I needed to get him ready for me.

I gently probed at him with my index finger, teasing and testing his comfort level. It slipped inside without too much resistance, and when Kai groaned, I grinned. *Perfect.* That was what I needed to hear. When I added

my middle finger to the mix and he canted his hips back, I knew he wanted this. Kai wanted to be penetrated.

I moved my fingers in and out of him, increasing my pace slowly while widening them, and by the time I added a third and Kai was writhing against the covers, I knew my boy was ready for the toy I'd brought.

I poured some lube onto the beads then moved the tapered tip into position at Kai's entrance. The second he felt the silicone against him, he tensed and I paused, waiting to see if the word *Monaco* would slip out.

But no sooner had I thought that, Kai visibly relaxed and pushed back against the toy.

"You want that, you greedy boy?" I circled the tip against his stretched hole, and Kai's fingers curled into the covers.

"Yes please, sir."

"Oh, I even got a *please* this time." I pressed the toy forward, and as it met with the tight ring of muscle, I said, "Well, who am I to deny you?" Then I added enough pressure to slip it inside of him.

Kai cursed and clenched the luxurious material covering the mattress. I stilled my hand, letting him get used to the intrusion.

"How do you feel?" I asked. I could see his shoulders moving with every breath he took.

"Full. But I like it."

"Do you want me to stop there, or can you take another?"

"Another," he said, then glanced back at me over his shoulder. "I want another one."

My cock ached as Kai kept his eyes fixed on mine and I slowly pushed the second bead inside him.

The sight of his creamy ass swallowing the black beads was a thing of fucking beauty. So much so, all I wanted was to grab hold of myself and come all over him.

The only thing stopping me was that I wanted to come *in* him more.

With the second bead in place, Kai lowered his head to the mattress and moaned, his hole clenching around the intrusion as he got used to the feeling.

"Talk to me," I said.

"One. More," he panted, his voice a little guttural, the arousal riding him hard.

I massaged one of his smooth cheeks, opening him even wider, then pushed the third bead inside of him.

Kai whimpered as I slid a hand up his back to caress his fevered skin, and when he started to writhe, I backed up and grabbed the remote that went with the beads, then stood behind him, looking at the delicious sight splayed out before me.

Tied up, spread open, and penetrated, Kai was every fantasy I'd ever had. Then I turned on the vibe, and the sound he made had me tossing the remote and reaching for my cock.

With a slippery hand, I worked my rock-hard dick at a frenetic pace, the visual of Kai fucking the bed in an effort to get himself off shredding my control. He'd pushed up slightly on his hands and was grinding down on both the mattress and the beads, and every time the black silicone rubbed over his prostate, my insatiable boy let out an ear-splitting cry that the entire crew could probably hear.

My balls tightened, threatening to explode if I didn't hurry up and replace the toy with myself, and when my name tumbled off Kai's tongue, my patience finally ran out.

I reached for one of the condoms I'd tossed onto the covers. Kai must've sensed something going on behind him, because he looked back as I tore open the packet, and groaned as I rolled it into place.

Just a little longer, beautiful, and I'll be exactly where we both need me…

"Don't you come," I reminded him. "Not until I tell you."

Kai nodded, and when I took hold of the beads and began to slowly pull them out, he bit into his lower lip and dropped back down to the mattress.

I switched the toy off and tossed it aside, and seconds later was pushing the wide head of my dick into his stretched hole.

Kai moaned into the covers, the sound straight out of an erotic film as I palmed his ass cheeks and spread them apart. His legs shook where they were tied open, and as his body slowly swallowed mine, a shot of pure, unadulterated pleasure raced up my spine.

"Oh fuck. Fuck, Kai…" His body was hot, tight, and the best damn thing I'd ever put my dick inside. And if I didn't get a handle of myself, it would be over before I even moved. I stilled deep inside him and closed my eyes for a second, thinking that might help, but all that did was direct my attention to everything else.

Kai's breathing…

Kai's scent…

That was doing jack shit to calm me down, so I decided to just let go.

I dug my fingers into his hips and pulled out of him one torturous inch at a time. Whom it was more torturous for, I couldn't say. Not judging by the raw sound ripping out of Kai's throat.

He was close, and when I surged forward again, driving him up the mattress until he was on his tiptoes, the friction along the underside of his cock, coupled with my deep penetration, had a loud curse ringing in my ears.

What a filthy mouth my sweet boy got when he was on edge.

I went at him like that, in and out, over and over, until the curses and shouts turned to moans and whimpers, and when his voice finally cracked and I bottomed out inside him, I leaned over him and kissed my way up his neck to his ear.

"You asked me once where my favorite place was."

Kai panted as he turned his head on the covers until he was facing me. His eyes were blissed out, his arousal right there at the edge of the precipice, as I rutted my hips up against his ass.

"*This*. This is my favorite place I've ever been." I nipped at his lip and then moved up over him to plant my hands over the top of his on the bed. "And you're going to have a hard time keeping me away now that I've found it."

Kai moaned as I began to pump my hips like a madman. I was crazed at the feel of him, my mind gone at the reality of him. I wanted to equal parts protect and consume him. Free him and keep him. But most of all I wanted to show him just how special he was. How deserving he was of pleasure so all-consuming that you forgot everything but how good you felt.

I trailed my fingers down his side and slipped my hand between the bed and his body, then took hold of his cock and squeezed.

Kai cried out and thrust back onto me as I gave him several rough strokes.

"Come, gorgeous. Let me watch you fly apart."

Kai shoved back on me as I worked his length, and a second later his body tensed and his cock jerked as he came in a rush all over my hand and the bed. He sighed and collapsed onto the covers, going lax as satisfaction washed over him.

But I wasn’t done yet, and the hot, sticky cum coating my skin was all the incentive I needed. I gently removed my hand and straightened behind him, then I licked his salty seed from my fingers and rode him hard and fast to a toe-curling orgasm of my own.

I couldn’t remember the last time I’d blacked out after sex. But as I woke a little later in the main stateroom of the yacht, the only sign I could see that we’d played out all my—and hopefully *his*—fantasies was a naked Kai, who was curled up in my arms, and a lone piece of crimson rope tossed over the edge of the bed.

Dream or reality? I wasn’t sure which right then.

But one thing was for certain as I kissed the top of Kai’s head and let my eyes fall shut: I wasn’t quite ready to wake up just yet.

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KAI

SOMETIME IN THE early morning hours, the captain moved the yacht into the harbor and docked us in a prime front-row spot near the finish line of the Monaco Grand Prix. Today was the final day, and from our vantage spot, we could see Theo—shit, *Prince* Theo—on the winner's platform with other members of the monarchy, including his brother. While Theo stood off to the side, laughing and joking with those around him, Prince Jean and his wife-to-be sat quietly center stage under the shade, watching the races and waving to those wishing them well from the crowd every now and then.

I peered through the binoculars I'd been given and turned them in the direction of the stage after the rush of cars raced by. Lucien was friends with *royals*. It was so surreal. And since they were right there, I couldn't help but be a little nosy.

"They're kind of serious, huh?" I said to Lucien, who was stretched out in the lounge chair beside me on the top deck of the yacht.

"Jean and Katerina?"

"Yeah."

"Engagement is pretty serious from what I've heard, yes." The snark in his voice made me lower the binoculars to scrunch my nose up at him, and he chuckled.

"I just mean they look like they have to be there, not like they want to be."

“It would be a bad look if they didn’t show up.” Lucien cocked his head as he looked in the direction of the stage. “Though I suppose being the future head of the monarchy weighs pretty heavily.”

I considered that, but then a rush of cars rounded the curve of the track, stealing all my focus. This whole race—or circuit, whatever it was called—was so stressful, just lap after lap after lap on narrow roads that didn’t leave much room for them to get past each other. The first three flew by, but the fourth clipped the wall and spun out suddenly.

“No way.” I jumped to my feet and held up the binoculars to get a good look at the car smoking on the side of the track. “I’m glad I didn’t actually place a bet. That was my guy.”

“Oh yeah? I thought I was your guy?” Lucien teased.

And just like that, the race was forgotten.

I grinned at Lucien, who provided a much better view than anything going on around us. When he drew a leg off his lounger to make room for me, I knelt.

“Trust me, there’s no comparison.” I trailed my fingers up his pants leg, and he caught them in his grip and pulled me on top of him, wrapping his arms around my waist. Last night had been intense, but in the best way, and seeing Lucien’s dominant side had been an unbelievable turn-on. Not only had he been attentive during what he called “the scene,” but afterward he’d made sure that I felt safe and cared for. It seemed to come second nature to him, which only made him more attractive.

“Don’t make me claim you right here in front of everyone.” He lowered his sunglasses and smirked. “The royals are watching.”

It was an empty threat, but my stomach flipped anyway. Not because I didn’t want him to do it, but because…well, what if he *did*?

A question that’d popped into my mind last night re-emerged, and I had to ask.

“Um.” I started to bite the inside of my cheek but then caught myself. There was no reason to hesitate in asking. He’d be honest with me and wouldn’t take offense. “Is that on your list of things you enjoy? To have people…watching?”

He moved his sunglasses up on top of his head to look me in the eye. “I’ll answer your question, but I’m curious if you already know what I’ll say.”

I didn’t have to think too long or hard about it, not when it was so obvious to anyone who met Lucien. He was confident to the extreme, not shy at all when it came to sex, and—

The cars racing by were so loud that they made it hard to think, and I waited until they passed again to answer.

“I think you like it,” I said, fingering the button of his open collared shirt. “I can’t imagine anyone who owns sex clubs being shy about that kind of thing. You’ve told me not to be embarrassed about pleasure and what I like, and not only that…”

“Yes?”

“You’re like a…sexual magnet or something.”

Whatever he’d been expecting to come out of my mouth, it obviously wasn’t that, and I had to pat myself on the back at the surprise in his dark eyes. He was usually so immovable that catching him off guard felt like a win.

“A sexual magnet,” he said, rolling the words around his tongue in amusement.

I shook my head and pushed against his chest playfully. “You know you are. I mean, look at you. Who wouldn’t fall over themselves to get to you? Or watch you? Or anything that gets them close to you? And you don’t ever seem to mind it, even when we’re just walking down the street. Last night, I don’t think you would’ve told anyone to go away if they’d shown up on the deck while we were there.”

“Have I told you how incredible you are at stroking…my ego?”

I laughed and went to push against him again, but he caught my hand.

“You’re right,” he said. “I don’t mind at all. Sometimes I even get off on it.”

“Sometimes?”

“It depends on the situation and if it’s something my submissive also enjoys.”

Oh, right. After everything he’d told me about dom/sub relationships, that made sense. He deferred to his partner, always.

As I contemplated whether that was something I’d be open to, I stared down at the way his large hand swallowed mine. I didn’t think I’d ever get over how strong and warm Lucien’s hand was when he was holding me. Maybe that would seem silly to anyone else, but it was something I noticed whenever it happened. Mine looked so small inside his sure, firm grip, and

when he laced our fingers together, it felt intimate. Like I was his and he was mine, even though we hadn't necessarily put it in those terms. Did we even have to after last night?

"How do you feel about that?" Lucien said, bringing my attention back to the conversation at hand.

"For you? I get it completely. For me? I'd…have to think about it."

"There's no pressure for you to do anything you're uncomfortable with. Remember that. And in the same vein, if there's anything you're curious about—"

"I'll tell you." I smirked. "So should I start by mentioning last night was something I definitely want to do again?"

He fingered the mark he'd left at the junction of my neck and shoulder, and I shivered, remembering how it had felt like a claiming.

"I liked that too," I said.

Lucien let out a low, primitive growl and hauled me against him. His kiss was deep, thorough, and so shattering that I was grateful he was holding me in his arms, otherwise I was sure I would've fainted into a pile of goo right there on the deck.

He sucked my tongue into his mouth, and I gasped at the sensation that did things to my dick that wouldn't be appropriate for the crowd surrounding us.

"You taste like heaven," Lucien said against my lips before kissing me again.

You are *heaven,* I wanted to say. But I kept that admission tucked inside for another time, not wanting to give too much of myself away, even though he had to know. Lucien was observant in ways most men weren't, and I hadn't exactly made it a secret I was falling for him. Anyone could see that.

I sucked and bit at his lower lip, making his cock jerk where it lay between our bodies.

The sound of Lucien's cell phone ringing in his pants pocket burst our little bubble, but he completely ignored it.

But the second time it started up, I reached for it, having overheard his last conversation with King. He was waiting on a call from him, so I reluctantly broke the kiss and handed him the phone.

He sighed, but hit accept and brought the phone to his ear. "Yes?"

I watched as his annoyed expression morphed into amusement, and then he lowered the phone between us and hit speaker. "Say that again so Kai

can hear it, asshole."

"Hello, Kai," Theo said. "I was just telling Lucien that the two of you are going to miss the final lap of the race if you insist on having eyes only for each other."

"Bullshit," Lucien said. "That's the polite version. That's not what you said to me."

"Well, virgin ears should be protected."

"You know better than that."

"No idea what you mean. Besides, a prince can't be crass. How *dare* you."

Lucien held his middle finger up in the direction of the stage. "Put the binoculars away and go entertain the rest of the aristocracy."

Theo was *watching* us? I sat up and grabbed my own pair of binoculars as Theo laughed and ended the call. When I trained my view on the stage, I saw him looking through a pair of his own, and he waved in our direction.

Lucien shook his head with a laugh and then rose to his feet and held his hand out. "Guess we can't miss the grand finale. Even if your guy doesn't stand a chance."

"Hey, yours went out on the first lap."

"She was targeted. It was a setup."

"Suuure." I joined him at the rail and watched the cars roar by as they headed into the last lap.

It was such a rush, the speed, the energy of the crowd, the gorgeous backdrop of Monaco—and, of course, the stunning man beside me. I was just starting to let myself believe I was actually here experiencing it all. There was still the voice in my head telling me I didn't deserve all of the incredible things happening, that I hadn't done anything to warrant being happy.

But one look at Lucien, one thought of the way he made me feel like anything was possible, and I shoved those worries aside for another day. If all I ever got was this time with him and all the experiences he'd given me, then I would take it and it would have to be enough.

"Here they come," he said, moving to stand behind me and resting his hands on the rail on either side of me.

The sound of the crowd grew louder, starting from off in the distance and then moving like a wave in our direction. Soon the mad dash to the

finish line began as the three drivers at the top of the heap battled it out on the last long stretch along the coast.

I didn’t even know who to root for now, but it didn’t matter with the frenzy happening, so I found myself yelling, “Go, go, go!” as they passed.

“And Marcello Farina has done it,” the announcer called out as the car from the Ferrari team raced over the finish line first. The roar of the crowd as they leapt to their feet was so loud that I couldn’t hear what else the announcer said, but it didn’t matter. Lucien and I both joined in to cheer for the winner, and then fireworks began to go off in every direction.

I took a mental picture of this moment and held it. I wanted to always remember what I’d seen and felt and experienced these last few days, in case I never got the chance to travel like this again. This moment felt like a culmination of everything over the last few days, and when Lucien’s arms found their way around my waist and he kissed the spot he’d marked on my skin, all I could think was: *It doesn’t get any better than this.*

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KAI

EARLY THE NEXT morning, I slipped quietly out of bed, leaving Lucien fast asleep so I could watch the sunrise. It was the last time I'd get a chance to see it with such a magnificent backdrop, so I grabbed one of the plush robes from the hook on the door and made my way onto the balcony. It was still dark and a little chilly, and I wrapped myself up in the robe and curled up in one of the chairs.

It was so *still* here, nothing like what it would be if I were sitting on a balcony at this time in Manhattan. The city never slept, which meant hearing the hustle and bustle of traffic and people at all hours of the day. It was never this peaceful. *I'd* never felt this peaceful.

I took in a deep, cleansing breath of salty-sweet air as the first hint of light crested over the water. The last few weeks had been such a whirlwind, and it was hard to fathom the stark difference between my life before and what I was experiencing now.

Was this just a blip in the struggle of my life? Or was this the time everything changed for the better? It had been so long since I'd held any kind of hope that I was scared to wish for more. Every choice I'd made over the years had been to survive. Dreams were a thing of the past, a luxury I couldn't afford, not when I needed to keep a roof over my head so I didn't end up back on the streets.

I took another deep breath, trying to let go of the fear rooting its way inside me. Since I'd met Lucien, I'd tried to fall into new experiences and

enjoy all the beautiful things he showed me, but how did I deserve any of it? This was Lucien's world, not mine, even if I desperately wanted it to be.

But more than that, I knew I wanted *him*. Even taking away this amazing trip and all the clothes and money and *things*, it was the man who made me feel like a person again. Not just some prize or pet or someone to be used. Lucien *saw* me. He read me like he'd known me all my life. Knew my intentions before I did. Wanted to communicate and actually listened when I talked. Didn't push too hard, and let me open up to him at my pace. And God, he pleasured my body like it was an altar he worshipped at. That was a high I could get used to but didn't dare, because what if this all ended tomorrow?

I just couldn't get my hopes up about that. I'd always prided myself on being a realist, and I needed to remember that.

But for now, I'd enjoy the sunrise.

Monaco awakened slowly, birds beginning to chirp and dash through the air, followed by the sound of people starting their day. It was beautiful and serene, and I didn't know how long I had been out there enjoying it all before the balcony door opened and Lucien stepped outside.

Wearing one of the black silk robes he preferred, he carried a couple of steaming mugs and set them on the small, round table between the two chairs.

"I thought you might enjoy the view more with tea," he said, sitting down to join me.

He was so damn thoughtful. And gorgeous. How did he look so good in the morning? It wasn't fair. I was positive I had bedhead, but Lucien looked as put together in a robe as he did in his perfectly tailored designer clothes.

"Thank you," I said, and took a sip of the tea. It was just the perfect amount of creamy and sweet to balance the black, and so damn delicious. "Wow. How do you always know what I'll like?"

Lucien only smiled like that pleased him, and sipped on his coffee. "Madagascar vanilla seemed like something my beautiful boy would want between his lips."

My heart squeezed. Every time he said the words "beautiful boy," it did that. He made me feel wanted, like I was really his.

"Thank you." I reached for him across the table, and he wrapped his hand around mine.

We stayed like that for some time, drinking in silence and watching the boats begin to sail along the water. This moment was perfect.

But it couldn't last forever, and the longer we sat there, the more my self-doubt started to creep in until I slowly drew my hand from his and wrapped it around the mug.

Maybe I was projecting. Maybe I was putting feelings on something that was as simple as sex. But every time Lucien smiled at me or did something like make me tea, my emotions got all kinds of tangled.

"Everything okay?" he said. Of course he'd noticed the shift in the air, the change in me. He noticed everything, which made it impossible to hide from him—not that I wanted to.

"Of course. I just…" I searched for the words to best explain my thoughts, but when nothing came, I just shrugged.

"Oh no, we're way past that, mister." Lucien put his mug on the table. "Talk to me. Something happened just now. Did I do something—"

"No. God no," I rushed out, shaking my head for emphasis. "I was just thinking about how perfect everything has been these past few days."

Lucien's brow furrowed. "And that made you pull away from me?"

There was no getting anything past him. He seemed to know me better than I knew myself.

"It wasn't you I was— I wasn't pulling away," I corrected myself. "I was just trying to remind myself that this, us, might not be…" *Forever*.

I couldn't actually bring myself to say the word out loud, so instead I let it drift off on the sea breeze, wondering if that was where our relationship was about to end up—lost in the Mediterranean Sea.

"This might not be what?"

Oh God, he was actually going to make me say it. But if I didn't ask I'd never know, would I? But I also didn't want to scare him off with thoughts of forever if he wasn't there. "Uh…real?"

Lucien's lips quirked as he reached over the table and stroked the back of his hand along my jaw line. "You feel pretty real to me."

"I know." I put a hand over his, holding it there, and turned my lips into his palm. "But this whole trip has felt like some kind of fairytale—"

"Not a 'Knight's Tale'?" Lucien pursed his lips. "Where's an opponent to duel when you need one?"

"We left him back in New York." The words were out of my mouth before I even thought them through, and Lucien's eyes darkened at the

reminder of Rupert.

“Yes, I suppose we did, didn’t we.”

I nodded and let go of his hand, and Lucien picked his mug back up.

“And this.” He gestured at the crystal-blue waters lapping at the side of the yacht. “It all feels a little too good to be true?”

“A little.”

“And you’re worried it’s about to come to an end.”

“Yes,” I whispered. “I can’t help but wonder what comes next for me. What I’m going to do. Where I’m going to go.”

For a second I thought I caught a flash of uncertainty cross Lucien’s features, but if I did, it was gone just as quick.

He tapped the side of his mug with his finger, looking thoughtful. “What do you *want* to come next?”

“I don’t know. In the past I’ve either been in survival mode or just accepting of my situation, whatever that might’ve been.” I took in a deep breath and studied the stunning scenery surrounding us. “But for the first time, I find myself wanting more.”

Lucien sat very still beside me. Very quiet.

“You can have it, you know.” His voice was low. “More.”

I didn’t know why, but I felt the sting of tears behind my eyes, and I looked away and blinked them back.

“Kai…” He reached across the table for me again, but this time I didn’t take his hand. I couldn’t, not when I needed to come clean about who I really was. He’d see me differently, but I had to be honest. I couldn’t let myself get caught up in this fantasy any longer without telling Lucien the truth.

“You’ve done so much for me,” I said, keeping my eyes straight ahead. “And it’s more than anyone ever has. You took me in no questions asked, and I’m thankful for that.”

I felt Lucien’s gaze on me as he silently listened, knowing there was more I needed to say.

“I mentioned that my parents kicked me out when I was a teenager.” When he nodded, I continued. “For a long time I didn’t know what to do or where to go. I slept where I could, in different parks, under a bridge. It wasn’t until I met others like me that I realized there were things I could do to survive and keep a roof over my head. So I…” I swallowed and forced it

out. “There are a lot of powerful men in the city who just want a pretty plaything.”

A long silence descended between us, but I could see the way Lucien was white-knuckling his mug. Still, he let me continue without interruption, though it had to be killing him. If it were me, I’d have so many questions.

“Sex has always been about survival for me,” I said. “It’s never been something I’ve enjoyed, just something that keeps me off the streets. No one I’ve been with has ever cared about me. I’m an afterthought. Unwanted until it serves their purpose.”

I finally looked directly at Lucien and could practically see the waves of emotion radiating off him. “You’ve changed all that for me.”

His jaw twitched, and when he reached out again for me, I let him take my hand. Instantly, I felt better, more at ease. My shoulders dropped and I sank back into the chair.

“You make me feel so safe,” I said. “You make me feel wanted. Like I matter.”

“You *do* matter.”

I squeezed his fingers gently. “I guess I’m just scared this is all going to go away. This time with you has felt like a dream, one I want to live in forever, but…”

What if you decide you don’t want me anymore? That I’m tainted. Used goods.

“Kai,” he said, then closed his eyes. When he opened them again, I could see his whole heart in those dark depths. “I promised you once that you would always have a safe place, whether you choose to make that place with me or somewhere else. I mean that. No matter what, you’ll never have to worry about where you live or what you’ll have to do to survive again.”

My chin wobbled, and I bit down on my cheek as he continued.

“I wish I could track down every single person that’s ever made you feel that you aren’t worth everything and rip them apart with my bare hands. I hate that you’ve suffered. I hate that you’ve been forced into things you never should’ve had to do, and most of all, I hate that your family, those who are supposed to love and care for you unconditionally, let you down when you needed them most.”

It felt like my heart was going to crack in two as a traitorous tear leaked out from the corner of my eye. Lucien reached over and brushed it away before taking my chin between his fingers.

“I’m not going anywhere. For as long as you want to be with me, I’ll be the rock you need. And Kai?”

His features were blurry now, and I wiped at my face before answering. “Yeah?”

“I want to be yours. And I want you to be mine. Whenever you’re ready, *if* ever you’re ready. No pressure. No expectations. Just know that with me, you’re wanted.”

At the sweet brush of his lips against mine, my entire body trembled and I felt the doubt and fear begin to dissipate. He kissed me so that I could feel him and the truth of his words everywhere. And when he leaned back, just enough that his words were a whisper against my mouth, what he said only solidified my path forward.

“Don’t forget, Kai. You’re my favorite place.”

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LUCIEN

"DECISIONS…" I SAID as I flipped through the shirts in my closet a couple days later when we were back in New York. I narrowed it down to two, took them off the rack, and then presented them to Kai, who sat cross-legged on my bed. "What do you think?"

"I think you should lose the clothes and stay right here." He patted a spot on the mattress beside him and then stretched his legs out in an invitation that would be impossible to resist—if I didn't have somewhere I had to be.

I dropped the hangers on the bed and caged him in, my hands on either side of his legs. Those pillowy lips begged for my teeth to sink into them, and I nipped and teased them until Kai leaned in for more and I pulled back, smirking.

"That's not fair." He sat back on his hands and pouted, and damn if that wasn't an enticing picture. "I could make it worth your while," he added, sliding his hand in the direction of his cock, but I took hold of his wrist before he could torture either of us any further.

"I'll be back before you know it." I pressed a kiss to that pretty mouth, not letting myself linger, or I really would blow off the rest of the night.

I grabbed the shirts I'd been choosing between and held them up again. When Kai pointed to the left one, I took it off the hanger and slid it on. As he watched me button up, an expression I couldn't place flitted across his face, so quick I almost missed it.

“Kai? Are you worried about someone getting in? Because I’ve got Lachlan and several members of his security team keeping tabs on the apartment. No one will be able to get to you here.”

“No, it’s not that.” He shook his head. “That makes me feel a lot better, actually.”

“Okay. Talk to me.” I sat down beside him and waited for what was weighing on his mind.

“It’s just… I guess I’m wondering, what now? Like, what should I be doing? You’re heading off to work, and I…” He trailed off.

“Have you given any thought to it before? Is there anything you’d like to try?”

His forehead creased as he traced patterns on the sheets with his fingers. “I…don’t know. No one’s ever asked me that before.”

“No?”

He shook his head and met my eyes. “I wouldn’t even know where to start.”

I didn’t know why it had never occurred to me to offer to help before. That he’d even been thinking of the future in that way. “That’s something we can explore together, if you’d like.”

“Yeah?”

“Absolutely. But just so you know, there’s no rush here. You can take your time.”

Kai ran his fingers through his hair and sighed. “I just feel like I’m not doing anything. You’ve done so much for me, and I’m not contributing in any way.”

“Hey.” I tipped his chin up to look at me. “You’ve been through a lot in your life, more than you ever should’ve had to experience. And right now you need time to heal from all of that shit. You don’t need to earn your keep here. This is your home, and you don’t need to decide what you want for your future right now. Got it?”

The worry between Kai’s brows eased, and he nodded. “You’re right. Thank you.”

I captured his lips in a reassuring kiss. “Tell you what. Since you’re in the mood to explore, why don’t you come with me to Libertine tonight?”

“Wait, really? Is that allowed?”

“You’re joking, right?”

He chuckled and held his hands up. “What am I thinking? You’re a very important someone at Libertine.”

“Damn right I am,” I said with a grin. “So, you in?”

“I’m in.”

“WELL, LOOK WHO finally decided to come home from his little Monaco vacation,” Benoit Olivier said as the elevator doors opened on the second floor of Libertine. “Tell me, how is our favorite prince faring in the face of so much love and celebration?”

Benoit knew damn well just how Theo would be taking the news of his brother’s upcoming nuptials, hence his sly grin. But just as I was about to answer him, his eyes caught on Kai, who was standing just inside the door, and any talk about the Prince of Monaco—either of them—was instantly forgotten.

“Oh, my apologies,” he said as he stepped inside to join us. “I didn’t realize you had company, Lucien.”

The doors slid shut behind him, and they were so shiny that they showed off the back of his designer cape as though he were standing in front of a mirror. Similar to myself, Benoit had a fondness for fine materials and top-notch designers, but where I was more subdued in my colors, gravitating toward blacks and deep tones, Benoit had a flair for the dramatic. Bright colors and swirling capes were an everyday accessory for him.

I looked at Kai watching Benoit, taking in the vivacious man standing in front of him.

“Kai, this is Benoit.”

“Another brother of yours?” Kai said softly, and I couldn’t help but grin, because look at my boy catching on to the kind of men I associated with.

“From a different mother, *mon cher*,” Benoit said, holding a hand out to Kai. “That’s for sure.”

Kai reached out to shake Benoit’s hand. But instead, the cheeky bastard brought the hand up to his lips to kiss, just as the elevator stopped *again*.

“Jesus,” I muttered. “Is this thing going to stop at every floor today?”

“Why are you so grumpy?” Benoit said as the doors opened. “You just got back from vacation.”

I wasn’t grumpy, per se, but I had been trying to get to the fifth floor without a whole lot of eyes on us. The last thing I needed was a bunch of

nosy assholes asking questions Kai didn't want to answer, and with this lot, you never knew how far they were going to go.

"Well I'll be damned," Benoit said as the doors opened and the two men standing outside came into view. "If it isn't Daddy FILTH and his PYT. My night just keeps getting better and better."

While mine was getting more and more annoying as the handsome man in the impeccable suit greeted us with a smile and nod, then stepped inside the elevator with his boyfriend's hand in his.

It wasn't that I had anything against Archer Carrington—in fact, he was one of my favorite members of Libertine, along with Preston Abernathy. But right now they were seriously cramping my space…literally.

Kai shifted closer to me and mouthed, *Daddy FILTH?*

I leaned down and whispered in his ear, "Father I'd Like To Hit."

Kai's eyes widened as he looked between Preston and Archer. "That's his *father*?"

A burst of laughter left me. Archer and Preston's story was complicated, but one thing was for sure—they were *not* related.

"No, no." I pulled Kai in and pressed a kiss to his temple. "I'll explain later."

"Something amusing, Lucien?" Benoit said as the three turned in our direction.

"Nothing I'm about to tell you."

"Hmm, fine. Keep your secrets. All of them." His eyes swept down over Kai. "If you must."

"I must."

"Uh huh, but in all seriousness," Benoit said, "what do you think would happen if three men and two pretty young things got stuck in an elevator?" His hand hovered over the emergency button.

"Don't even think about it," I growled.

"Stopping the elevator? Or three men and two pretty young—"

"How about neither," Archer said, shaking his head. "Quit it, Benny."

Benoit let out a put-upon sigh. "Fine, if I must. But I see you're heading to level five, Lucien, so maybe I'll—"

"Go anywhere *but* there for the rest of the night. Good idea."

Preston snickered as Archer shook his head.

"How about you come up to the penthouse tonight with us, Benny?" Archer winked at me, and I could've kissed the man—but figured Kai and

Preston might have something to say about that. “I’m meeting with a client and then we’re having dinner sent up.”

The elevator announced its arrival on level five with a loud *ding* just as Benoit said, “Are you trying to manage me, Archer Carrington?”

He was suddenly pulled to the back of the elevator by his friend, and as I led Kai out, I heard, “No, I’m saving you from getting your ass kicked, instigator.”

The elevator doors slid shut, and though there were too many questions in Kai’s eyes to count, we’d arrived at our destination.

“We’ll talk about all *that* another time, but for now I have one question for you.” I nodded toward the two doors welcoming us to level five, one red, and one black, both of them unmarked. “Would you rather go mild…or wild?”

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KAI

MILD OR WILD? What was he—

Ohh. This was the sex club Lucien ran at Libertine…or was it two clubs?

I looked between the doors, which weren't labeled, so how did anyone know which was which? And what did "mild" and "wild" entail, exactly?

"Which side is like The Veil?" I asked.

"I'd say both encompass The Veil. Though you didn't see the back rooms."

Back rooms? The things I *had* seen were pretty mind-blowing already, and I wasn't sure if I wanted to imagine anything beyond that.

Then again, I wanted to see what Lucien was into. What he oversaw on the nights he was here. Or would he be joining them? I was so naïve about this stuff that I hadn't even thought about that, and I filed the thought away for later.

"Do you have a preference?"

He shook his head and slid his hands into his pants pockets.

Well, that was helpful.

"Okay," I said. "Then which side leads to your office?"

"They both do."

I let out a frustrated growl and pointed to the black door. "I don't know which side that is, but why don't we go with your favorite color?"

Lucien smirked, reached for my hand, and led me inside.

The first thing I noticed was that every wall, every piece of furniture, even the ceiling and floors were all shades of black. The only light came from the crystal chandeliers overhead, and those were dimmed to match the vibe. Once my eyes adjusted, I was able to make out the many figures all around us, and…

Oh my God.

My hand tightened in Lucien's, and when he looked down at me, I rose on my tiptoes so those nearby didn't hear me.

"If this is the mild side, you and I need to have some conversations about heat levels," I said.

Lucien let out a throaty laugh and then leaned down to brush his lips against my ear. "Welcome to the wild side, beautiful boy."

He moved farther into the room, pulling me along with him, since my feet didn't seem to want to move. I thought I'd seen some things at The Veil that were hot, but I didn't even know where to begin to look here.

The first thing I saw when we walked in was a man hanging from handlebars with his legs tied spread-eagle while his partner spanked different parts of his body with some kind of long spatula thing.

Not wanting Lucien to think I was uncomfortable with anything in here, I tried to keep my face neutral as we passed by. There were lots of really interesting rope techniques, some of the partners suspended in air and others waiting patiently on their knees. Leather was definitely a favorite with this crowd, with many of the dominants sporting nothing but leather pants.

Speaking of leather…

I didn't think anything could shock me, but then a man in a face mask walked out in front of us, a leash in his hand and someone in a puppy suit crawling after him.

Lucien did mention role play, though that gave a whole new meaning to the term *good boy*.

"Everyone has their kinks," Lucien said, as though he could read my mind. "And no one is ever shamed for something they enjoy. So if there's anything you see that intrigues you…"

As we passed a trio of men, two of them taking turns fucking the third across a bench, I wondered if I was going to be too mild for Lucien. Had he done all of these things? Would he prefer to be with someone who enjoyed them too? I wasn't sure I could imagine myself crawling after Lucien on a

leash, but then again, I felt so safe with him—would there be anything I *wouldn't* try at least once for him?

Just as I was beginning to wonder if I'd picked the wrong side, a tall male stepped out of the shadows with what looked like a whip in his hand. He had his eyes locked on his younger partner, someone maybe my age who was straddled over a leather-padded beam.

He was completely naked, and his arms and legs were secured with cuffs around his wrists and ankles.

"Have you ever seen a flogging horse?" Lucien asked by my ear.

"Um, no?"

He chuckled and kissed my temple. "That wasn't a trick question. I just want to know what you might need me to elaborate on."

"You can *elaborate* on that? As in, you've been tied to one? Or tied someone *to* one?"

"Um, both?" he said in the exact tone I'd just used, and I narrowed my eyes on him.

"Be serious."

"I am." He nodded to where the man with the rope had moved up behind his prone partner. "I remember tying someone to it. But my being tied to one occurred a few too many years ago for me to remember with any accuracy."

I stared into Lucien's twinkling eyes, trying to decide if he was messing with me or not. But when he winked and turned back to the scene unfolding in front of us, I realized he'd meant every single word he just said.

It was the first time Lucien had ever referred to his past partners or sexual experiences in any way, and I was almost as shocked by that fact as the idea of someone tying him to a flogging horse in the first place.

The man with the whip began to back away from the one waiting bound and silent, and I watched his fingers flex around the thick handle.

He had big hands, like Lucien's.

Strong hands, like Lucien's.

And as he began to gently flick his wrist in the direction of the man bent over, the tail of the whip sliced through the air and made a resounding *crack* that made me jump.

Holy shit. That was *loud*. And as I looked around, I noticed I wasn't the only one who'd snapped to attention.

Several other patrons had turned to look in the same direction, and when the man took another swing, the crack hit much closer to the one secured to the horse. Unlike me, though, he stayed still as a statue. How that was possible, I had no clue.

“See something you like?” Lucien said.

“I don’t actually know.”

A deep chuckle left him as he rubbed my lower back. “What has you unsure?”

“Seriously?” I asked, looking up at him.

“Seriously.”

“How about the cracking whip?”

Lucien nodded. “I can understand that. It can be scary seeing it for the first time, but—”

“Seeing it is not scary,” I interrupted.

“It’s not?”

“No. The idea of being on the other *end* of it is scary. But watching it, seeing someone who knows how to do it and obviously someone who wants it…”

“Yes?”

I gave Lucien a shy little smile and said, “Let me watch, and then I’ll tell you how I feel after.”

“Tease,” he muttered at the same time the whip was flicked again, and this time the end hit the back of the bound man’s thigh. A moan filled the air, reassuring me that the man did indeed *like* to be whipped, and if that wasn’t a whole mindfuck on its own…

I couldn’t imagine being tied up like that. But I sure could imagine the sexy man beside me wielding a whip.

“So, um, you do that, huh?” I whispered as the flogger let free another couple of cracks.

“Oh no you don’t,” Lucien said, eyes forward as I looked at his strong profile. “You said you would tell me your thoughts after you watched some more. So if you want something, Kai, use your words. Tell me.”

I bit down into my lower lip, wondering if I was actually going to ask this, when another crack rent the air. Then I thought, *When in Rome*…

“Do you ever whip people like that? Here?”

Lucien finally turned to face me, his lips curving into an immoral smile. “Would you like me to?”

“Yes,” I blurted out before I could censor myself, not realizing just how much I wanted to see him like that until right this second. “I want to watch you.”

Lucien took my chin between his fingers and brushed his lips over mine. “Let me see what I can do.”

He went over to the dom to speak briefly, and when the other man offered him the whip, Lucien held up a finger.

The smirk on his lips was sexy as hell, and as he headed back toward me, he began to unbutton his shirt.

“Wait, what are you—” I didn’t want him to get *naked* in front of all these people.

But after he shrugged out of his shirt and handed it to me, Lucien pressed a hard kiss to my lips. “Enjoy the show,” he said, and then headed back to the scene.

This time, he knelt beside the submissive, and I would’ve bet money on his asking for the guy’s safe word. As Lucien stood up and took the whip the dom offered, he caught my eye and shot me a wink. The second he turned away, though, his entire demeanor changed. There was a power to the set of his broad shoulders, tension coiling every muscle of his taut body, and then he flicked his wrist. It was a slight move, but the crack that hit the floor was louder than any of the ones from before. It made me jump and made everyone in the room stop what they were doing to watch Lucien.

I couldn’t tear my eyes away as he snapped the whip in the direction of the bound man, the tip of it marking one of his plump ass cheeks and causing him to groan. It was a sexual sound that was only cut off when Lucien changed direction and the whip made contact with his other cheek. Twin red marks bloomed against his pale skin, but the guy was writhing against the flogging horse like he wanted more.

The next time Lucien aimed, I wasn’t watching to see if he hit his mark. No, I was watching the way he wielded the whip like it was an extension of his arm. The way his muscles flexed with the move. How unbelievably hot he was with his pants riding low on his hips, enough that when he turned to the side, I could make out the deep V of his abs disappearing beneath the designer band of his boxer briefs. I was pretty sure I was drooling.

How in the hell was *this* the man who kept inviting me into his bed? His home?

My cock began to throb as he marked another spot low on the guy's ass. I licked my lips, and Lucien happened to glance over his shoulder at me. His eyes dropped to my mouth, his expression turning heated.

Without looking away, he handed the whip back to its rightful owner and strode toward me. The crowd that had gathered to watch parted for him, but he paid them no mind, his stare locked on mine with every step he took.

It was insane the reaction I had just looking at him. My body hummed with anticipation, my dick kicked against my briefs, and my pulse spiked so hard that I thought I might pass out.

He was coming…for me.

I went to reach for him, but his steps didn't slow, and he hauled me into his arms like I didn't weigh a thing. Instinctively, I wrapped my legs tight around him as I reached for the back of his neck, almost losing my grip on his shirt when our mouths collided in a fiery kiss.

With my eyes slammed shut and Lucien holding me, he took off for some destination unknown. But I didn't care where that was, as long as I was with him.

And as long as he kept his hands on me and no one else.

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KAI

A DOOR SLAMMED shut behind us, but I was too lost in Lucien's kiss to know where he'd taken us. All I knew was that it was silent except for a soft crackling sound I couldn't place.

With my body still wrapped tightly around Lucien, he backed me up against the door, his cock growing hard against me as he devoured my mouth. I met every lick and suck of his tongue, not even caring how desperate for him I seemed. It hadn't even mattered that he'd been in a scene with someone else, not when he'd put that performance on just for me. Everyone there had to know him, and yet *I* was the one he wanted.

It was a potent feeling.

We were both breathing hard when we pulled back, taking big gasps of air. My eyes opened to a large room, again in all black but with cream-colored candles lit all around us, which was the crackling sound I'd heard. It was beautiful in a sexy, sinful kind of way, and as Lucien helped lower my legs to the floor, I took it all in. The most surprising thing in the room was the bed, and that was only because it felt too normal to be in a place like this. The other things, like the flogging horse from the main area, seemed more in line with the wild side of a sex club, but as I eyed the wall of what looked like different torture devices, I shivered.

I just wasn't sure if that reaction was more from being curious or nerves that Lucien might use those things on me.

"Floggers," he said, pointing out the row of different colors and sizes of handles with long leather tails, and then the rows above it. "Paddles…

cuffs…canes…blindfolds…nipple clamps.”

When my eyes went wide at the last one, he let out a low chuckle.

“All of these are about sensation. What turns you on and makes you feel good. Does anything catch your interest?”

I ran my fingers over the tails of the flogger, the feel not what I expected. They seemed like they would almost tickle, unless they were wielded in a more forceful way.

“Maybe these,” I said, before moving on. The paddles were definitely not my speed, at least not tonight. “The blindfolds.” I nodded at where they hung, too high for me to reach.

Lucien took one from the wall, along with a pair of leather cuffs that I pointed out.

I liked when he restrained me. When I gave him total control over my body and wasn’t able to do anything about it when he drew my pleasure out past the breaking point.

My eyes shifted over the glimmering candles around the room and then back to the sexy-as-sin man watching my every move.

“Are these to set the mood?”

“Sometimes.” Lucien put the items he held on the end of the bed, then walked over to one of the candelabras and took a long, tapered candle from its holder. “And sometimes it can be used to…enhance a partner’s experience.”

As the flame flickered, nerves fluttered in the pit of my stomach. “Fire?”

“Not in this case,” he said, stopping in front of me. “I was thinking more the wax.”

“Oh…” My eyes shifted to the clear liquid around the base of the wick.

“Here, hold out your arm for me. Let me show you.”

“I—”

“Do you trust me?” Lucien said, and my answer was automatic.

“Yes.”

“And you remember your safe word?”

“Monaco.”

“That’s right. I will never do anything to hurt you.” His lips crooked. “Not unless you ask me to. So, having said that, will you hold out your arm for me?”

I nodded and did as he asked, and when he slowly tipped the candle over my forearm, I gasped as a small drop of the hot wax fell onto my skin. It was a strange sensation, allowing it to stick and cool. But as the heat permeated my skin, it sent a fire racing up my veins—and I liked it.

"Did that hurt?"

The sound of Lucien's voice was hypnotic, and as I brought my gaze up to his, I shook my head.

"Would you like to see how that feels on other parts of your body?" Lucien's eyes roamed down over my chest to my waist and…below. My cock stiffened under the scorching once-over.

"Yes, sir."

Lucien placed the candle back in its holder and gestured to me with a slight tilt of his head. "Then it's time for you to remove your clothes."

I looked down at what I was wearing and reached for the buttons of my shirt.

"Eyes on me while you do it, Kai."

I brought my gaze back to his as I kicked out of my shoes, then I continued with the buttons of my shirt. There was something so incredibly empowering about stripping for a man like Lucien. In the past I'd always been made to feel less than, but his attention was like an aphrodisiac. He made me feel confident and sensual, as though I was the sexiest thing he'd ever seen in his life.

I shrugged out of my shirt and went to toss it on the bed, and he said, "Give it to me." I did just that, and he brought it to his nose and took in my scent. "Now the rest."

My pants were gone in seconds, along with my briefs and socks. When I was finally standing naked before him, Lucien walked to me, hooked the shirt behind my neck, and drew me to him—so close, I had to crane my neck up to look him in the eye.

"I'm going to do things to you tonight that you never dreamed of, you beautiful boy." He nipped at my lips, then grinned like the devil himself. "Now climb up on the bed and let me get you ready."

The satin sheets were smooth beneath my skin as I scooted up the bed, and then Lucien tied on the blindfold. Instantly my senses were heightened as he laid me back on the bed. A leather cuff clamped on to my left wrist, my arm stretched out to the side to hold me in place, followed by my right arm.

Then, to my surprise, cuffs followed at my ankles, leaving me spread out across the bed and unable to move.

“Look at you,” Lucien said. “So fucking sexy.”

Something incredibly soft brushed over the inside of my calf, rising up my inner thigh. I gasped at the way it tickled my skin, leaving a trail of goosebumps in its wake.

“How does this feel?”

I arched up into what felt like a feather as it teased over my chest and swept down over my lower stomach.

“So good,” I said, pulling against the restraints instinctively, but not because I wanted to get free. Not being able to see where he’d touch me next amped up my anticipation to a ten.

But just when I expected another brush of the feather, Lucien switched it up. Hot wax pooled over my stomach, and I sucked in a shocked breath. It didn’t burn, not like I would’ve thought, though the skin along my belly was more sensitive than where he’d poured the wax on my arm.

“You like that,” Lucien murmured, running the feather across my collarbone.

“I do,” I started, but then more hot wax dripped down onto my body, this time along my upper thigh. It was close enough to my cock that another couple of inches and it would’ve made contact, but Lucien was too sure-handed for that. He wanted to tease and torture me in a way that brought pleasure, not discomfort.

He had to know I was enjoying this, because I couldn’t hide the way my dick hardened with every featherlight stroke or trickle of wax. I couldn’t decide which I liked more, not when the juxtaposition was making my head spin and my body writhe.

“Lucien,” I moaned, needing more, needing *him*.

“There something you want, Kai?” Even his voice was teasing, and that’s when I knew he was getting off on what he was doing to me. Just picturing Lucien’s erection straining against his pants had me pulling against all the restraints holding me in place.

“I need you inside me,” I said, breathing harder. “Please.”

In response, he poured wax over my right nipple, making me gasp, and then I heard movement and the sound of a zipper. The restraints on my ankles were removed and my legs pushed up so my feet were flat on the

bed. Lucien licked the underside of my shaft from base to tip, then took my entire cock all the way down his throat.

"Oh God," I cried out. "*Lucien*…"

His answering hum vibrated around my shaft, down to my balls, but then his mouth disappeared—

Only for him to spread my ass cheeks apart so he could sweep his tongue over me there.

"Breathe out for me, Kai," he said, and when I did as he instructed, his tongue breached the tight ring of muscle.

I cursed, part of me wishing I could see him between my legs and the other part sinking deep into the sensation.

Lucien devoured me in the same way he did every part of my body, wringing cries out of me when I begged him for more. It was all too much and still not enough, the way he could bring me to the brink of an orgasm and then prevent me from going over the edge. I'd never met anyone so inherently sexual, someone who knew exactly what I liked and needed, even if I didn't know myself.

His mouth left my hot hole, only to be replaced by his thick cock nudging at my entrance, and I was ready for him to devastate me.

"Please," I begged again as the tip of his dick teased but didn't enter.

If I could see him, I had no doubt he would have a sinful smirk on his face, delighting in drawing this out and making me even more desperate for him.

When Lucien pulled back, I started to sit up in protest, only to be held down by the arm restraints.

"So needy," he said, and just when I opened my mouth to beg again, he drove inside me with one sharp thrust.

I sucked in a breath at the initial intrusion but let it out so my muscles would relax. I wanted Lucien as deep as I could get him, and lucky for me, he wasn't holding back tonight.

The way he grunted as he drove into me was pure sex, and I welcomed the bite of pain that always came with the initial penetration. It was the sheer size of him, so thick and long—and fucking perfect—that took a second for my body to adjust to.

When he bottomed out inside me and stayed right there so I felt every incredible inch of him, it was *on*.

Lucien pulled out to the tip before shoving himself back in, his hands on my knees to give himself leverage. It was a whole different experience not being able to see him or anticipate his moves, and he kept switching up the pace—fast and then achingly slow. Rocking into me inch by inch or slamming home.

I welcomed it all with greedy whispers I wouldn't dare say if I looked him in the eye. The blindfold made me braver. The moment Lucien switched to jerking off my cock, I took full advantage, lifting my feet from the mattress and wrapping my legs around his waist.

"Naughty boy," he said, his voice coming out so deep and rumbling that my dick twitched in his grasp. He wasn't the type to punish, though—I was learning that. Instead, he fingered the slit, coating the head with my slick arousal, while he sank deep inside me.

It was sensory overload in the best way, and all of it made it that much harder to hold on to my already-thin control. I wanted to last all night with Lucien this way.

But then his hips began to move faster, his fist matching the pace. My legs couldn't hold on any longer, and I dropped my feet back on the bed and focused on not coming.

That was easier said than done, though, when Lucien changed the angle of his hips. His cock slammed right into the sensitive bundle of nerves that made it impossible to hold back the orgasm on the horizon.

My lips parted on a wordless cry as each of Lucien's thrusts were punctuated with "So. Fucking. Beautiful."

Fireworks exploded behind my eyelids as I came in a rush, trembling with the force of it. It felt like an out-of-body experience as Lucien's movements became erratic, and when he came with a roar, the heat of his arousal marked my chest and stomach.

"Fuck, Kai," he said as his hips began to slow.

I tried to lift my legs again, to hold him there, filling me, because I knew the instant he left, I would miss him.

He stilled, rubbing my calves, lingering like he didn't want to leave either.

But then he slid out of me and pressed a kiss to my knee before moving off the bed.

I was content to lie there as I came down from the high, wondering why I'd ever settled for anything less than this. I never knew it could be this

good.

One by one, Lucien freed me from the cuffs, and then a warm, wet towel swept across my chest and stomach, then down my hips and my cock. The mattress dipped and Lucien moved in beside me, pressing a kiss to the palm of my hand before resting it by my side. He repeated the same move on my other hand and massaged both of my wrists as I hummed in contentment.

“You did so good,” he praised, his stroking fingers feeling like heaven against my skin. “Thank you for trusting me.”

When he lifted the blindfold off, I blinked, grateful the light was minimal but enough to see his handsome face. He searched my eyes like he was checking to make sure I was okay, then leaned in to press a kiss between my brows. My body was so spent I couldn’t move if I wanted to. Lucien cradled me in his arms and began to gently peel the dried candle wax off me.

“That…was amazing,” I said, trying not to let my eyes fall closed.

“You sound surprised.”

I nodded against his neck as he continued to clean me up. “I am. I didn’t think I’d like the hot wax, but… We can definitely do that again.”

He ran his fingers through my hair, brushing it back from my face. “So curious.”

“Can I help that you make me that way?”

“That’s all you, beautiful boy.”

“I love it when you call me that.”

Lucien pressed a kiss to my temple. “I know.”

He held me for a long time, and I felt so wanted in his arms. His hands were always moving, massaging my sore muscles in a way that felt like a thank you.

I’d never had a thank you before.

A yawn escaped me and he laughed, sitting us both up.

“We can’t have any of that,” he said with a wink. “I’ve got to actually do some work while we’re here.”

“Oh, is this not your office? Whoops.”

I didn’t mind this detour at all, and it only got better when Lucien bent over to swipe his pants off the floor and that spectacular ass came into view.

“So this office of yours,” I said, biting my lip as indecent thoughts flooded my brain, “does it have a desk we can use?”

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26

LUCIEN

AFTER GOING OUT for dinner Friday night, Kai and I went back home so I could get a jump on rebuilding plans for The Veil while he curled up with a book. We'd gone up to my office, gotten the fireplace going, since we both enjoyed the way it made a room instantly cozier, and then settled in —Kai with his laptop on the chaise, and me at the heavy ornate desk I'd imported from France, a hand-carved masterpiece with iron quatrefoils and gothic arches. It suited me, and this space, and even though I didn't enjoy sitting behind a desk, if I had to, it better be one on this grand scale.

Tonight, it was necessary. I had proposals from my contractor spread across the surface, along with several ideas from designer friends of mine for how to make The Veil even hotter, since I wasn't a fan of doing the same thing twice.

Thankfully, King had spearheaded the teardown of the building, since it'd been a total loss, and managed to accelerate the permits with his many connections. Things would hopefully be moving full steam ahead once I met with the insurance agency Monday, though I was still contemplating just what to do with the man who'd made the sad attempt at trying to bring me down.

I glanced over at Kai, who had the book so close to his face that I wondered if he could actually read it. He turned the page, clearly intrigued by what he was reading, and then did a double take when he saw me watching him.

"Oh, sorry. Did you say something?"

I shook my head. “Just looking at you. Something in there catch your interest?”

“This book is wild,” he said, inserting a bookmark. “I had no idea there were so many kinks out there. This is very…thorough.”

After our night at level five at Libertine, Kai had gone through my library and chosen a book with stories of BDSM and the D/S life. I found myself enjoying his reactions and commentary and wondering what, if anything, he’d be curious to try in the future.

He held up the book. “Is this how you learned about being a dom? It’s a pretty good instruction manual.”

“No, that came after, but I’m glad you’re finding it helpful.”

Kai set the book aside and stood up, stretching his arms overhead and showing off a sliver of olive skin along his hips. If he was trying to distract me, it was working.

“Can I ask you a question?” he said, strolling over to the desk.

“Nah.” I smirked. “Ask me anything.”

Kai narrowed his eyes and then stopped on the other side of the desk. “How did you get into all this? Owning sex clubs? This whole lifestyle? It’s not exactly something they teach in school, unless that’s what I missed out on the last couple of years.”

I leaned back in my chair and steepled my fingers in front of my lips. I’d wondered if and when Kai would get brave enough to ask about my… profession. It wasn’t exactly a normal nine-to-five job, but it was one that I’d always found fulfilling.

The nightlife wasn’t for everyone, but I’d found it was where I did my best work.

“It’s quite the story—are you in for a bit of a tale?”

Kai nodded, sitting on the desk’s edge.

“Let’s see, where’s the best place to start…” I pursed my lips, then winked at him. “Italy, probably—Milan, to be specific. That’s where I was born. I know, it’s hard to believe I’m Italian with a name like Lucien and looking like this.”

Kai snorted and nudged my knee with his toes. “Be serious. I didn’t actually know you were Italian.”

“*Sì, signore.* I grew up between countries. Dad was Italian, mom American. So we split our time evenly. Six months in Milan and six in Manhattan.”

“Wow. That’s some childhood.”

“It was. One my parents always made sure I was aware of. They never let me take for granted the privilege their money afforded us. But at the same time, they got all that money by working hard and keeping busy. Which meant *I* had a lot of time alone, a lot of time to get bored, and maybe a lot of chances to go a little bit…wild.”

“A little bit?” Kai cocked his head, his expression doubtful.

“To start with.”

“That sounds more like it.” He chuckled and I reached for his foot, rubbing my thumb up along the arch of it.

Kai moaned.

“You think I’m wild?”

“Um, you literally have a painting of a dom with his sub kneeling at his feet hanging on the wall behind you right now.”

His eyes flicked to the art piece I’d acquired on one of my trips to Amsterdam many years ago. It was one of the most beautiful depictions I’d ever seen of the lifestyle I’d always longed for. Soft yet commanding all at once. The love and trust exhibited by the sub, his full acquiescence, was something I’d been searching for ever since laying my eyes on the painting. And the dom, so enamored, so devoted that he would lay down his life to give his sub all that he desired. It was something I’d craved since the first time I’d seen a D/S relationship in action.

“Maybe I am a little.” I shot him another wink. “In all my young curiosity, I’d sneak into clubs and bars. One night I heard people whispering about a place nearby, that they couldn’t believe the things they’d seen. *Debauchery*, they said—which, of course, meant I had to check it out.”

“It was a sex club, wasn’t it?”

“It was. My first introduction, and I was instantly fascinated. I came back every night, watching and learning, asking questions, though it was lucky for me those doms didn’t kick me out. They must’ve seen something of themselves in me, that I was obsessed with learning everything I could about the lifestyle, and showed me the ropes—”

“Literally?”

I laughed and tickled the bottom of his foot, and he jerked away. “That too. Eventually I trained to be a dom and traveled all over the world. I got to be pretty well known for it.”

“Uh, no kidding. I’d beg you to come here too.”

“Would you?” I said. “Beg me?”

Kai blushed and shoved me in the arm. “Pretty sure I already have loads of times.”

I caught him by the wrist and brought his fingers up to my lips to press a kiss there. “My favorite sound.”

Heat sparked behind his eyes, but I let him go so it could simmer while I finished the story.

“Eventually I decided I could make my own club. A haven that was both luxurious and private, where I could be in total control. It was while I was there that a particularly powerful man came to be my submissive for a time. At the end of our sessions, he’d be so relaxed he would spill his secrets, and that was when I realized my other path in life.”

Kai’s eyes were wide with interest. “Stealing secrets?”

“Is it stealing if they freely give them? I have more money than I could ever spend, but trading in secrets? That’s a currency worth more than gold. So I opened another club. Then another. All over the world, there are places like The Veil, where the richest, most powerful members of society can go. They come in, have a safe place to land for anything the outside world deems too much. And if they happen to have loose lips, I use it to my advantage. But only if they cross me or my brothers first.”

Kai’s mouth opened, closed, and opened again. “So that’s the connection with Libertine?”

I brought my pointer finger to rest against my lips, keeping that question unanswered—out loud, anyway. I couldn’t divulge the secrets of Libertine. That we had connections most people couldn’t even dream of. Each of my brothers had roles to play, and mine had been set long ago. People came to me from all over the world for forbidden trysts, and I kept those associations in hand for anything that would serve us in the future.

“I never thought about using secrets as currency,” Kai said slowly, like he was thinking it over. With the way he’d mentioned being with rich men, it made me wonder if there were things he knew that he could use to his advantage.

But that would be for him to decide.

“Only when necessary, and *only* if it’s well deserved.”

“Like with bad guys?”

“Exactly like that.”

He gnawed at his lower lip. “Rupert?”

I leaned back in my chair and went back to massaging his foot. “I don’t have all that much on him.”

He eyed me for a beat, his mind working overtime as he absorbed everything I’d just told him. “What if I do?”

I’d never push Kai into giving up information he had on someone else. But at the same time, I wouldn’t stop hunting down whatever I could find on that motherfucker Rupert.

I was coming for him, one way or another.

“I have my secrets, and you have yours. But you should know, I *am* looking. What he did, it needs to be answered for. He could’ve hurt my patrons, my staff—”

“You.” Kai’s voice was soft as his eyes fell to the lingering reminder of that night on my chin. “I can’t even begin to imagine a world that you aren’t a part of…”

My chest tightened at the emotions swimming in his blue-grey eyes, and before I could help myself, I sat up and reached for his hand, urging him to his feet.

“Hey,” I said, taking his hips and drawing him between my legs. “I’m right here. Nothing’s going to take me away from you.”

Kai ran his hands through my hair and tipped my head back to look up at him. “You promise?”

“I promise.” And fuck, in that moment I would’ve promised him anything just to keep his hands on me.

Kai’s eyes searched my face as he ran his fingers along my cheek and around my lips. Emotion swirled deep in those cloudy depths of his, and then he whispered, “What about when others try?”

“Others?” Was he worried someone else might be out to hurt me? It was true that I came into contact with some unsavory characters in my line of work and through Libertine, but nothing he needed to be concerned with.

“I…I can’t be the only one who wants to *be* with you.”

Ah, so he wanted to know our situation. What our relationship was. I’d been careful not to push him in any way, wanting him to make the decision, and it seemed he finally had.

“But what if you’re the only one *I* want to be with?”

Hope and desire flashed across his face as I turned my head and pressed a kiss to his palm.

“That painting behind me,” I said, and Kai’s eyes shifted back to the scene he’d been looking at earlier. “It’s all about love and acceptance. Of themselves and each other. That’s the kind of relationship I’ve always wanted. The kind of love I’ve been looking for.”

Kai swallowed as he examined the scene more closely. “The sub… He’s collared.”

“Yes, a symbol of the dom’s ownership, his love. He’s claimed him and wants the world to know whom he belongs to.”

“And the dom?” Kai’s fingers twisted in the back of my hair, and I wasn’t even sure he realized he was doing it. “How does the world know whom he belongs to?”

“Because he shows everyone they meet. In the way he talks, touches, and respects his sub. His every move is designed to please his partner. His entire world revolves around making sure his sub is taken care of. Anyone that meets them will instantly see the connection if it’s real.”

I could see the question hovering on Kai’s lips, the burning desire to ask me what it was *we* had. But I needed to hear the words.

“Ask me, Kai.”

I could see his nerves starting to kick in as he tried to navigate this unfamiliar territory, so I took hold of his hand and laced my fingers in his.

“Come up here.” I sat back in my chair and drew him into my lap, and Kai straddled me. “There, isn’t this better?”

He looped his arms around my neck as I smoothed my hands up his back. “Much.”

“Good. Now, where were we? Oh, that’s right.” I pressed a kiss to that tempting mouth. “You have questions. Now’s the time, beautiful boy.”

Kai took in a deep breath, then finally spoke. “Have you…have you ever been in a relationship like that before?”

“No. All of the relationships I had in the past were purely physical.”

Kai frowned, not too happy with that answer, but I wouldn’t lie to him. Not ever. My number one rule was honesty, and this was something he needed to hear and understand.

“They revolved around desires of the flesh and nothing more. Not because I didn’t want more but because I never found anyone who fit what I was looking for.”

Kai wriggled further up my lap, his sweet behind warm and snug against my hard-on as his legs cradled my hips. It was as though he were

made specifically to be there.

As if he could read my mind, Kai whispered, “I fit.”

“Yes, you do.” But I could see something else was on his mind, something important to him. “What is it?”

“I don’t want to be with anyone else. And I don’t want to share you either.”

It took every ounce of control I had not to smile at his demand as I stared into his earnest expression. He was dead serious, and his possessiveness made a growl rumble up inside me.

“Done.”

“Just like that?”

“Just like that.” I kissed along his jaw to his ear. “This has always been about you and what you want. It’s always been your choice. I’ve just been waiting for you to choose me.”

Kai caught my lips in a kiss so sweet that it made my stomach flip.

“I can’t ever remember wanting anything as much as I want you.”

I brushed my lips over his and pulled him in tight, positive he could feel my heart with as loud as it was thumping. “I’m yours.”

Kai nestled in and pressed a kiss to the side of my neck, and as he relaxed into my hold whispered, “And I’m yours.”

As we sat there like that in my office, arms and legs twined around one another, I couldn’t help but think about how long I had waited for him. How far I had looked.

I’d gone from country to country, searching for the kind of feelings coursing through me in that moment. But it wasn’t until right now, with this beautiful boy in my lap, that I was finally experiencing true fulfillment—and, by some miracle of fate, he felt the same.

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27

KAI

THE STORM CLOUDS rolled in late Monday afternoon as I walked into Lucien's library and eyed the oversized chair that faced the windows.

I had the place to myself for a few hours, since Lucien had headed out to meet with the insurance company looking after The Veil, and instead of sitting around twiddling my thumbs, I planned to put the time to good use.

A conversation we'd had last week had been niggling away at the back of my mind, about what I might want to do now that I was free of Rupert and had the opportunity to look toward the future. But never having thought about it before, I'd had no answer.

That was going to change today.

With a tray of tea in hand, I carefully made my way over to my favorite spot and placed it on the small table beside the chair. I'd already plugged in the laptop Lucien had given me, and after pouring myself a cup of the tea and adding the flavored, frothy milk, I curled my legs up under me and reached for the computer.

The problem was, I had no idea where to start.

"Have you given any thought to it before? Is there anything you'd like to try?"

Lucien's words swirled in my head as I sat there watching rivulets of water trickle down the tall panes of glass.

Why would I have? It wasn't like I would've been able to pursue anything I was interested in before. Hell, I didn't even know *what* I was

interested in.

But sitting here feeling sorry for myself wasn't going to get me anywhere. I was moving forward. I had a future to look forward to, thanks to Lucien. He'd stepped in when he'd seen my struggle and…saved me.

My eyes shifted to the book I'd picked out to read the first time I set foot in here. The one that held "The Knight's Tale." I thought back to the conversation we'd had about it not being real, that people didn't do things for nothing, and how Lucien had told me he might be able to help change my mind.

I'd wanted to believe him. Wanted to give my trust to the handsome stranger who'd appeared from out of nowhere and offered me an out—and now, weeks later, I found myself trusting him more than I ever had anyone in my life.

That was what had put me on the path to a better life.

One person listening.

One person caring.

That one person I could trust.

And while my relationship with Lucien was a whole lot more now than someone offering a helping hand, what if *I* could be that for someone? What if I could be the person they could open up to and know was there to help?

With that thought in mind, I opened the laptop and typed into the search bar, *Careers in community outreach.* Then, deciding to be more specific, *Careers in LGBTQ+ and homeless outreach jobs.*

A list of positions appeared on the page, ranging from social workers to program directors. I clicked on the ones whose job description sounded most appealing, but whenever I got to the "Job Requirements" section I ran into a roadblock I had no way of skirting—*must have high school diploma or equivalent.*

That wasn't something I'd had a chance of getting, having been kicked out before I was able to finish school. But surely my life experiences could be seen as a form of education. Who better to help people than someone who had been through, and survived, a similar situation?

I wouldn't be deterred. There had to be *something* I could do. Some way I could help.

I wasn't sure how long I sat there combing through job site after job site. But dozens of links, pages, and posts later, I realized my search was

futile. The more I read, the more disillusioned I became. I wasn't qualified for *anything*. I was about as useless as the couch I was sitting on.

Even more so—at least *it* had a purpose.

Ugh. Frustrated, I shut the laptop.

"No need to hide any illicit searches from me."

I whipped my head in the direction of the door to see Lucien leaning against the frame, his legs crossed in that casual way he had about himself.

I sighed. "At least that kind of search would've proven practical."

Lucien's smile fell as he straightened and came in to take the seat opposite me. He was dressed today in his usual black fitted pants and button-up shirt, but had paired those with a silk vest that had a gorgeous, textured finish that shimmered in the light.

He looked sexy, sophisticated, accomplished. An *educated* man of the world.

Which annoyed me all over again.

"Hey, now," he said, leaning forward to look me in the eye. "What's that look about?"

I turned my attention toward the windows, trying to rein in my irritation. It wasn't Lucien's fault I was completely incompetent.

"Kai?"

I swallowed, trying to fight back the desire to tell him nothing. Lucien was too smart for that—he'd see through the lie immediately. Plus, I didn't want to lie to him. I just didn't want to admit to being such a failure.

"Did something happen while I was gone? Did Rupert—"

"No. No, it's nothing like that." And now I felt like an asshole for worrying him that way. I was on a roll today.

Lucien relaxed at my response, but when I didn't elaborate further, he gave my leg a gentle squeeze.

"Want to maybe tell me what it *was* like, then? It's obvious something has you upset."

"It's just…" The words *I'm useless* and *I'm qualified for exactly nothing* were right there, but I couldn't seem to get them out.

"It's just what? You were in such a good mood when I left. Excited about looking up jobs." Lucien's eyes shifted to the computer and back to me. "That's it, isn't it?"

I lowered my eyes, not wanting him to see my embarrassment at being so…inept. But in true Lucien style, he reached for one of my hands and

gently drew me to my feet. The computer fell flat on the couch, and he grabbed it up and handed it to me as he pulled me down onto his lap.

"Show me."

"Lucien, I—"

"Please," he whispered by my ear, and added a kiss to my temple to sweeten the request.

Sighing, I reopened the laptop and pulled up the last job listing I'd been looking at. "See, no porn. Sorry to disappoint."

"You could never disappoint me," Lucien said as he reached around me to scroll down the page. "A social worker. I could definitely see you doing something like that. In fact, I think you'd be great at it."

So did I—too bad I had no hope of ever finding out.

"I could help you apply if you like? Get a resumé written up for you and some—"

"Stop," I said, shaking my head at Lucien's enthusiasm.

"Stop?"

"Yes, stop." I got to my feet and walked over to the window to stare out at the storm clouds. "You're making it sound so easy."

"It *is* easy. We can have the resumé done in minutes. I've got references you could use, then we'll fill out the application and—"

"No, you don't understand." I turned back to face him. "I didn't graduate."

Like a light bulb had gone off for him, Lucien nodded—but if I thought that fact would slow him down, I was in for a rude awakening. He put the computer aside and got to his feet, coming to where I stood at the window.

"That's okay," he said, taking my hands in his. "That's just a small detour, one we can work toward together, and once you pass that, you can decide where you go from there. Social work, mental health, or a more managerial position."

"It doesn't bother you to be with someone who doesn't have a degree? Someone who didn't even graduate high school?"

"No, Kai, it does not." Lucien let go of my hands to cradle my face in his palms. "You are smart in so many ways that go beyond schoolbooks. Life is taught through experience, exploration, and knowledge. Books are just one part of that. Your hands-on experience is knowledge no one but you has. It was the harshest of schoolrooms, and yet you survived it. No one but *you* can draw from that. So if you want to pursue a degree, if you want to go

back and get your GED so you can help others like you, then let's get you what you need."

I blinked at him, wondering how he had the ability to understand exactly how I was feeling, always.

"How do you do that?" I asked.

"What?"

"Always know what to say to make everything better."

"I just want what's best for you." He tipped my face up and lowered his forehead to mine. "Whatever that might be."

I closed my eyes and breathed in his scent, Lucien's presence settling and calming everything inside me. "It's you," I whispered. "You're what's best for me."

"Then you're in luck, because I'm not going anywhere."

He wrapped me in his strong arms, and that unfamiliar feeling of hope once against bloomed inside of me.

Lucien was right. I could do this. I had the experience, the determination, and the fight to make a difference in other people's lives. Just as he had mine.

I wasn't about to let those who'd come before him define who I was. No way.

From here on out, I would be Kai Daniels, survivor.

I refused to be a victim any longer.

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LUCIEN

I CHECKED THE time on my phone and then looked over at where Kai slept peacefully in the bed beside me. It was the middle of the night, but I hadn't gone to bed yet, not when I was expected to be at a monthly meeting that one of my brothers, Alessio, required we all attend.

Brushing Kai's hair from his forehead, I pressed a light kiss there and took a minute to look at him. He was so beautiful he was almost angelic, and I wanted nothing more than to scoop him up and hold him close.

Before doing all the dirty things he begged me to.

It felt wrong any time I had to leave him, and tonight was no exception. Even with the security team guarding the place, I hated having to leave.

But I would. Because the bitching from Alessio if I didn't was not something I cared to experience.

I slipped out of bed and changed out of my robe into something more fitting for where I was going—one of my best suits, shoes polished to a spit shine, and I even added the rosary my mother had given me when I turned eighteen.

"You have to work?" came a voice thick with sleep, and I turned around to see Kai squinting at me.

"No work tonight, beautiful," I said, sitting on the edge of the mattress as I added a pair of vintage cuff links to my sleeves.

"Oh. Hot date?" He gave a teasing half-smile and batted my hand away so he could take over putting on my cuff links.

"Yeah, with a priest."

Kai began to laugh, and I couldn't blame him because it sounded ridiculous even to my ears, but when I didn't join in, he raised a brow.

"Wait, you're serious?"

"I don't seem like the type to go to church?"

"Um. Maybe if church is a euphemism for showing someone heaven, though I'd really hope that someone is me."

I growled and caged him in, stealing a kiss from those pouty lips. "Give me two hours and I'll do just that."

"But first…church?"

"Mhmm. Confess our sins and get a clean slate until next month."

He eyed the rosary. "I didn't realize you were religious."

"I'm not. None of us are, but Alessio is, and since it helps him sleep at night, we all agreed to go."

"You and your brothers? Does that include King? Even Theo?"

"Everyone who's currently stateside, yes. I think Theo got back last night."

"Huh." Kai sat back on his hands, and I could practically see the wheels turning in his head. "So do you feel like it helps?"

"I figure it can't hurt."

"But...what do you actually talk about? It's not like you can talk about sex club stuff with a priest."

"Why not?"

Kai's mouth fell open.

His expression was priceless, and I chuckled as I got to my feet and straightened my lapels. "You'd be surprised how open-minded and nonjudgmental some priests can be. I'm sure he's heard worse than what I confess." I pictured the rest of the guys going into the confessional one by one, each of them more delinquent than the next. "As a matter of fact, I *know* he's heard worse."

"Interesting…" Kai was fully awake now. "Sorry, I don't mean to sound so surprised. I just never pictured you or any of your brothers doing something like that."

"I don't think any of us would if Alessio wasn't such a pain in the ass about it."

I pulled my phone out of my pocket to check the time. If I didn't leave now, I'd be late, and *that* was as bad to Alessio as not showing up at all.

With one last kiss, I drew the covers up over Kai. “Go back to sleep and I’ll be home before you know it.”

“Be safe,” he said, settling back against the pillows.

“Always.”

I was almost out the bedroom door when I heard him say, “Lucien?”

I turned around to see him sitting back up.

“Is that something anyone can do? Go to confession?”

The question made me pause. “Is that something you might be interested in?”

“I think it might be.”

It had occurred to me that Kai might need someone other than me to talk to, but I’d been thinking more along the lines of a therapist. Someone who could help him make sense of his trauma and encourage the moves he was making for the future. He’d spent the rest of the week looking up GED classes and schedules, but maybe it would do him good to meet with someone now. Father Rafael Vitale was a compassionate man who had a gentle way about him that would be a perfect fit for Kai.

Just like that, my plans changed, and I called Alessio.

The second he picked up, I said, “Before you bitch at me for not coming tonight, tell him I’ll see him tomorrow with a special visitor.”

A string of obscenities filtered through the line, and I held the phone away from my ear. Alessio was loud enough that even Kai heard him and had to cover his mouth to keep from laughing.

I knew exactly what he was thinking, though: That’s *the guy who wants you to go to church?*

No way was I going to get into the fact that Alessio made us all go but never actually partook in his own confession time with Father Vitale.

“I hear you,” I said, keeping the phone a healthy distance from my eardrum. “Kai hears you too, but just so you know, he’d like to meet with your priest.”

“He’s *not* my priest,” Alessio said.

I rolled my eyes and shook my head at Kai. “Well, if he’s not your priest, then it shouldn’t bother you that I’ll see him in a few hours instead of right this minute.”

“It chafes my ass and you know it, fucker,” Alessio snapped.

“My apologies. So you’ll give him my message?”

“Wouldn’t dream of it. Let him think you stood him up.”

“Has anyone ever told you you’re a hypocrite?”

Alessio let out a long-suffering sigh, and I could imagine him rolling his eyes right back at me. “Every damn day. What about it?”

I smirked. “You should think about confessing tonight. Might do you some good.”

“Bite my ass.” He ended the call, and I tossed the phone aside for the night.

“Good news,” I said, turning back to Kai and pulling the rosary up over my head. “I’m home early.”

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KAI

BUTTERFLIES FILLED MY stomach as Lucien and I walked up the steps of St. Andrews the next day. I hadn't felt this nervous since the night I first met Lucien, but the towering gothic revival church before us was…well, intimidating was an understatement.

Lucien gave my hand a squeeze. "Nothing to be scared about."

There he went, reading me to a T. "How do you do that?"

"Well, the fact that you're tinged a little green makes it easy."

"I am?" I stopped moving, and Lucien turned back to me, giving me an easy smile.

"Not at all, but I wouldn't blame you for being anxious. Churches can have that effect."

I had a feeling he didn't include himself in that, because I doubted there was anything that made Lucien anxious. He was so calm and confident all the time, and I wished some of that would rub off on me.

Why had I decided to do this again?

I took in a deep breath through my nose and then we started back up the stairs toward the entrance. The doors yawned open and a pair of older men in black robes greeted us, giving directions to Father Vitale when Lucien asked.

If I thought the church was stunning on the outside, one look at the absolutely massive and magnificent interior left me speechless. The space was bigger than it looked from the street, with spires and stained-glass

windows. There wasn't a service going on, but there were still a handful of people in pews, lighting candles and even taking pictures.

"Lucien," a male voice said warmly from behind us, and I turned to see a tall—very tall—man.

Lucien smiled and inclined his head. "Father Vitale."

That was the priest he'd been talking about?

I knew I was staring, but I couldn't help it. His height was the first thing I noticed, because he had several inches on Lucien, who wasn't a short guy by any means. The second was how Father Vitale didn't look anything like what I expected. He wore the right clothes for the job, but he was far too attractive and young to actually be a priest…right?

"You must be Kai," he said, smiling down at me and holding out his hand. With the sun shining through the stained-glass windows, the reflection off his fair hair made it look like he had a halo.

How am I supposed to confess to him*?*

"Uh, yes," I said, shaking his hand while still holding on to Lucien with the other. "I mean, yes, Father Vitale."

Despite my surprise, there was something comforting in his grip and the way he smiled at me. He had kind eyes, the same I'd always thought about Lucien, and it made my shoulders relax.

"Will this be your first confession, Kai?" he asked.

I nodded. "It is."

"Well then, we'll keep it to getting to know each other, how's that?"

When I nodded again, Lucien brought our joined hands up to his lips and kissed my knuckles. "I'll be here when you're done."

I squeezed his fingers in response and then followed Father Vitale to the confessional booth, hoping that what Lucien had said about no judgment held true.

LUCIEN WAITED UNTIL we were about to get into the car outside of St. Andrews to ask, "Care to go for a walk with me?"

It was a mild day in the city, not too hot, but I wouldn't have cared if it had been a hundred degrees. Not if I got to spend it with Lucien.

He told the driver he'd call if we needed him and then laced his fingers through mine.

"Are we going anywhere in particular?" I asked.

"No. Is that all right?"

“Definitely.”

We walked in silence for a long time, and I was grateful he gave me some time to think through everything I’d talked about with Father Vitale. It had been weird to open up at first, but he was so easy to talk to, and he asked questions that had me wanting to spill my whole life story.

It helped that I couldn’t really see him through the partition in the confessional. It was much easier to say things when you didn’t have someone staring at you, even if they did have kind eyes. But the more I talked, the more I realized I was telling my secrets, my story, to the wrong person.

Not that a man of God could ever really be considered *wrong*. But the man I should’ve been confiding in was the one holding my hand. The one who had entrusted me with his secrets, his home, and his heart.

I stared at Lucien as he hit the crosswalk button, and when the light changed, we walked over to the entrance of Central Park.

“You know, as many times as I’ve walked around this place, I never get sick of it,” Lucien said as we strolled further in.

He was making small talk, another reason I absolutely adored the man. He was giving me a moment with my thoughts, not pushing for information or details about what I’d talked about with the priest. Instead, he was doing everything in his power to make me feel comfortable and at ease after allowing myself to be so vulnerable.

I cuddled into his side, resting my head against his arm as he guided me over to a bench that faced one of the lakes. “I can see that. There’s always something new going on.”

“Exactly.” Lucien took a seat, then pulled me down beside him, wrapping an arm around my shoulders. “Never a dull moment.”

“I don’t think you actually know the meaning of a dull moment.”

Lucien’s lips twitched. “Are you trying to say I’m outlandish?”

“Not trying. I *am* saying you’re outlandish.”

“Not always. I can enjoy the simple things in life.”

I chuckled but took the distraction for what it was. “Such as?”

“A simple pot of tea and toast in the morning.”

“Simple? You served it to me in some fancy, gold-plated Turkish pot. That is not simple, Lucien.”

“Tea and toast is as simple as it comes.”

“And yet somehow you still made it an adventure.”

He shrugged and then laughed good-naturedly. “What can I say? I believe in enjoying life, even the simple pleasures. I want you to be able to as well.”

“Which I appreciate.”

“Mhmm.”

“I do.” I kissed his cheek to prove it. “Something I *also* appreciate is your giving me a moment to gather my thoughts.”

“Is that what I was doing?”

I arched a brow. “Yes. Don’t think I’m not onto you. I’m starting to read you as well as you do me.”

“Memorize every chapter.” Lucien pressed a long kiss to my palm and then placed it on his chest. “I want you to know me by heart.”

My cheeks heated under his intense stare, his words mirroring my own sentiments, which was why I needed him to know what I’d confessed back at St. Andrews.

I’d told Lucien a lot. Where my story started and how I’d survived. But the one thing I hadn’t confided was how I’d ended up in Rupert’s company. It wasn’t pretty—in fact, it was downright ugly. But I needed him to know. I wanted him to know *all* of me.

“Today with Father Vitale, I was able to…let go of a circumstance that was beyond my control.”

Lucien curled his fingers around mine and drew my hand down to his lap. “You can tell me anything.”

“I know, this is just… It’s so recent. It’s harder to box up and push it aside.”

He nodded. “This is about Rupert?”

“Yes. How I, um, came to be in his…possession.”

A muscle twitched at the side of Lucien’s jaw, but beyond that he remained silent and still as a statue—a good indicator to me that he was holding back what he truly wanted to say.

“There’s a lot of rich men in this town who think they can buy whatever and whomever they want,” I began. “I’m sure you’ve met a lot of them.”

“No doubt,” Lucien said.

“Well, sometimes guys like me get…passed around.”

“Passed around?” Lucien let go of my hand and shot to his feet. “What the fuck does that mean? As in sex? At a club? Obviously I know guys who are into—”

“As in bought and sold. Traded. From one rich, bored guy to another… as their plaything to do whatever they like with.”

Lucien balled his fists as he stared down at me. “That’s how you ended up with Rupert? He *paid* for you?”

“I mean, it’s not really that much different than selling myself on the street.”

“Yes, it fucking is. That’s a horrible way of life, but at least it was *your* choice and you were doing it to survive. These men were selling you for their own gain. That’s very fucking different.”

I swallowed. Deep down, I knew he was right. His anger was completely justified, and man was he angry.

I probably should’ve been angry too. I’d just been in that way of life so long that I felt…resigned.

“Did he ever…” Lucien had to work to unclench his jaw. “Hurt you?”

“You mean physically?”

“I mean in *any* way.”

“He never hit me or anything like that, but it’s not something I would’ve put past him if I’d acted out. I just lay low and did whatever he wanted me to. I didn’t go out with him a lot, though. He kept me locked in my room for the most part unless he wanted me.”

The fire in Lucien’s eyes simmered dangerously, and I had to look away. I didn’t want that gaze trained on me when he was thinking murderous thoughts about Rupert.

“That’s not why I brought him up, though, not why I’m telling you all of this.”

Lucien took in a deep breath and gritted his teeth.

“Remember the other night, when you were telling me about being a keeper of secrets? That you often find yourself in possession of information and knowledge because of the people you’re around and their willingness to talk…”

Lucien cocked his head, intrigue filling his eyes. “I do.”

“And that sometimes if a person is bad you might, um, use that to—”

“Bring a motherfucker down?”

“Yeah, that. What if I told you I had some about Rupert? Secrets, that is.”

If anyone had asked me right then, I would’ve sworn to seeing twin flames light in Lucien’s eyes.

“Could you use them to help you in the fight for the club?”

“Most definitely.” Lucien reached for my chin, and as he tilted it up, I winced. The sun behind him cast a bright, shimmering glow, making his silhouette tower over me. If Father Vitale had looked like an angel, Lucien in that moment looked like a fallen one, ready to avenge any and all he cared for.

“I would use it to fight for my club…and you.” He reached for my hands.

“Me?”

“Yes, you. For all of the cruelty he subjected you to. And for any who might follow.”

I swallowed, convinced now more than ever that I was handing this information over to the right person. Lucien would know what to do with it. He would use it for the greater good.

He squeezed my fingers and said softly, “Will you tell me?”

I nodded and turned to face him. Then proceeded to tell him *all* of my secrets.

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LUCIEN

THE NEXT DAY I headed to Libertine, wanting to get the information Kai had given me in hands that knew just what to do with it.

After making my way through the main entrance, I headed down the long hallway and held up my wrist to the scanner on the wall. Each of us—the owners of Libertine, my brothers—had a microchip implanted beneath our skin, and it was the only way to get into the underground of the building.

Through the wrought-iron door I went, past the torches lining the stone walls, to a place only the seven of us ventured to regularly.

Though Libertine served its members' every need and desire on one of the many levels above, down here was where we made the plans that affected the world at large. King had been the one to bring us all together years ago, and each of us were men of different backgrounds, specialties, and influence. We used that power for the greater good, even if that meant having to do bad things to shit people—and that was exactly what had brought me there.

I scanned the cavernous space and all the "offices" off the main room. We each had one, though none of them had doors, just wide, curved openings carved into the stone.

I headed into Alessio's office, and he took one look at me and spun away in his chair.

"Not talking to you."

I grabbed a chair from the main room and parked it beside his. “Good to see you don’t hold a grudge.”

“Course not. The next time your ass wants me somewhere, I’ve already made other plans.”

It was a struggle not to roll my eyes. “Kai enjoyed meeting with Father Vitale yesterday. It helped him a lot.”

Alessio huffed, but moved his chair to face his wall of computers and gave me a side-eye. “You know, even Lachlan knows to bring an apology gift when he’s an ass.”

“You’re right. What do I owe you? Whiskey?”

“A bottle of the Yamazaki single malt, aged at least fifty-five years, will do.”

I let out a low whistle. “That’s a half-a-million-dollar bottle right there. Is that the going rate for getting all up in your feels?”

“The last bottle sold at auction just short of eight hundred, actually.”

“I’m not buying you an eight-hundred-thousand-dollar bottle of whiskey, fucker. How about I give you a mission instead?”

Alessio turned to face me and kicked his boots up on the edge of his desk. With his long brown hair and preferred uniform of jeans and a plain tee that hugged his oversized muscles, he didn’t look like what I’d expected a meticulous tech genius to be. We got a mouthy smartass instead, but none of us would have it any other way.

“I’m listening,” he said.

“The asshole who blew up my club. I want him to pay.”

“Finally. Been waiting for you to give me the go-ahead, and Lachlan’s about to fly off his leash.”

“Try to keep him on it for now. We don’t need to add to the body count.” I paused. “Yet.”

“Noted.” He crossed his arms and settled back in the chair. “So whatcha thinkin’?”

What was I thinking? That I wanted nothing more than to get my hands on Rupert and fuck his shit up. “The club was one thing. But Kai…” I closed my eyes and forced myself to breathe, thinking of what Kai had gone through, the isolation, the mental games, the emotional turmoil. Being traded like a belonging and not treated like the unbelievable man he was? It weighed heavily on my mind, and now with the secrets he had given me, I could hit Rupert where it hurt.

Reputation. Money. Power. I wanted it gone.

When I opened my eyes again, I said, “Rupert owns the Manhattan Contemporary Gallery, but it looks like he’s not exactly aboveboard with the business.”

Alessio arched a brow. “Tell me more.”

“There were several high-profile sales Kai was witness to that involved forged certificates of authenticity. He knows where those documents are hiding.”

“I love when rich men are idiots. I can only imagine his digital footprint.”

“Think you can do anything there?”

Alessio scoffed and dropped his feet from the desk. “Is the pope Catholic?”

“You tell me—you’re the one with the closest contact.”

“You trying to piss me off? ’Cause last time I checked, you were asking me for a favor.”

“This is true. So how about this, I—”

“Get lost? Great idea. I’ll text you when I have something.”

I was about to protest, ready to get moving on my Make Rupert Suffer plan, but Alessio had already dismissed me, his focus firmly back on his screens.

Not about to sit there and twiddle my thumbs all night, I headed back out into the main area of our subterranean headquarters and ran into Shep. Or, as all of America knew him, Shepard O’Neil Winchester III. A pompous name was apparently standard for any royal, even the American kind.

“Fancy running into you here tonight. No meet-and-greet with the governor over at the mansion this evening?” I said.

Shep aimed that million-dollar smile my way, the one that had been splashed over countless magazines, from fashion to politics, then slipped his hands into his pockets.

“Despite what you all think, my life doesn’t always revolve around schmoozing and—”

“Kissing ass? Isn’t that the same thing?”

“Sometimes. But let’s not forget, I only schmooze because it gets me leverage. You think I’d be spending my time with a bunch of politicians for fun?”

“Is that a trick question? I only spend time with them to take their money.”

Shep scoffed and clapped me on the back before pointing to the throne room, where there was a fully stocked bar. “You up for a drink? I’ve been meaning to ask you something,” he added.

I followed him through to the vast room that housed seven high-back throne chairs that sat upon a raised dais. It was where we held initiations into Libertine, and at times, member meetings.

There were smaller tufted velvet seats filling the space, but tonight Shep and I were more inclined to stand up at the bar in the back. He headed behind the stone counter, and after he poured us a couple of glasses of whiskey, we threw back the good stuff.

“You wanted to talk to me about something?” I asked, wondering if it had anything to do with Rupert, or, for that matter, Kai. Shep waded in the kind of waters I knew that rich, powerful men who’d go after Kai would swim in.

“Yes, I do. You just got back from Monaco, did you not?”

“I did. Why do you ask?”

Shep’s lips curved in a devious smile as he tapped the rim of the glass. “Well, as you might have heard, a certain prince is getting hitched.”

“Yes, I might’ve heard something along those lines.” I raised a brow, not missing the twinkle sparking his eyes.

“How’s Theo taking the news?”

“How do you think?”

“About as well as if it were him who was to walk down the aisle in the next few months.”

“Why are you so interested?” I asked, and reached for the bottle Shep had left on the counter.

“Because the family and I received a formal invitation to it this morning.” My hand stopped mid-pour as Shep chuckled. “I was just wondering what kind of royal nightmare I was going to be walking into. After all, we need Theo to stay calm.”

That made sense. Of *course* Shep had been invited to the wedding of the year. I’d been so caught up and consumed with everything going on in my world that it hadn’t even occurred to me that the Rinaldi wedding was going to either be one of the most advantageous or disadvantageous unions Libertine could make.

That, however, was all going to come down to Theo—and maybe, by the sounds of it, Shep.

I didn't envy him that position at all. But then again, that was the reason he was King's number two and I was not.

"Good thing you'll be there, then." I finished off my second pour and got to my feet. "Imagine if we sent Benoit."

"In all fairness, he is the life of any party."

"That he is. Listen, if that's all…?" I gestured over my shoulder, and was about to hightail it out of there and back to Kai when Shep got to his feet. His famous, charming smile from minutes ago fell away.

"I heard what happened to your club." He looked across the hall to Alessio's office. "He working on it for you?"

"He is."

Shep nodded, those twinkling eyes turning shrewd, and as if a mask had slipped down over his face, King's second-in-command appeared in front of me.

"Anything I can do for you?"

That was a loaded *anything* if there ever was one, because whatever you needed, Shep could get, and sometimes that offer was too tempting to refuse.

"I'm good right now. Things are in motion, but if I need you, I'll call."

"Good deal. Have a good night, brother." Shep clapped me on the shoulder and headed back to the bar, and as he poured a third glass he called out, "You should bring your new man around next time. We're all looking forward to officially meeting him."

His words had an immediate grin curving my lips as I left Libertine and made my way home. To my "new man."

I fucking loved the sound of that.

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KAI

LUCIEN'S TASTE WAS impeccable, and so was his penchant for finding the best view in any city. I'd never been to the top of the KeyLark building, where a revolving restaurant gave three-hundred-and-sixty-degree views of the city and far beyond, and watching the sunset from every angle was nothing short of breathtaking.

So was the lobster crepe with creamy truffle sauce— topped with truffle shavings—that I was currently inhaling. If we hadn't been in such an opulent setting with others around, I probably would've scooped up the sauce with my finger and licked it off. It was *that* good.

"I think I might've gotten the wrong entree," Lucien said as he cut into his steak and watched me with a hint of amusement on his lips.

"You did. Absolutely." I scooped some onto my fork and held it up to him. "Can I interest you in a taste?"

Lucien leaned forward and slid the crepe off with his teeth. As he swallowed, my stare dropped to his throat, and then back to his mouth when he licked a bit of sauce from his lower lip.

Damn. How did he look so hot even doing something as normal as eating?

But nothing about Lucien was normal, and that was one of my favorite things about him—the way he made sure to make the little things interesting.

"You're right," he said, and dabbed his mouth with his napkin. As our waiter passed, Lucien caught his attention and said, "We'd like two more of

these to go, please."

The man nodded, and as he went off to put in the order, I grinned like a fool. "You're so good to me."

"Oh, those are for me. Why, did you want some?" Lucien couldn't hold his smile back for long, and I found his leg with my foot, barely able to hook it behind his from where he sat across from me.

"Guess I'll have to be quicker than you to the fridge."

"I have longer legs."

"But I'm shorter and faster."

"Hmm." He took a sip of his drink and studied me. "Sounds like someone might need to be tied up."

"That's not the threat you think it is," I said, running the tip of my shoe along his leg. When his eyes sparked with interest, I laughed and dropped my foot, returning my attention to the meal before I got us both in trouble.

Lucien, on the other hand, gave zero fucks.

He moved his legs on either side of mine and kept us connected as we finished our meal. After taking my final bite, I picked up my napkin and dabbed the corner of my mouth, and didn't miss for a second the way Lucien watched with a smirk.

He brought his drink to his lips. "Have you decided what you're going to eat for dessert?"

"No. Was I supposed to pick that out before they took the menu away?"

"No, no." He chuckled. "That's just where I look first."

"Of course it is. Life's pleasures and all."

Lucien winked and placed his glass on the table. "You know it. So, tell me, what do you think of this place?"

"Are you kidding?" I managed to tear my eyes off the gorgeous man opposite me long enough to take another look around us. The Empire State Building was now clearly in sight, and tonight it was lit up in all different colors. It wouldn't have shocked me in the slightest if that had been Lucien's doing too. My lips twitched at the idea as I took in the other patrons of the restaurant, took in the smiles, laughter, and memories being made. For once in my life I was a part of that, making memories I would cherish for the rest of my life. "I think it's wonderful."

"I think *you're* wonderful."

Heat crept up my neck as the waiter appeared by our table to collect our empty plates. "Would you like to see the dessert menu?"

“He would,” Lucien said. “I’m going to have my usual.”

“Of course, Mr. Vale.”

The waiter inclined his head and left, and I leaned over the table toward Lucien.

“Mr. Vale? Your *usual*? How often do you come here?”

“Surprisingly, I’ve never *come* here.” Lucien ran his eyes down over me, and I felt that fiery gaze *every*where. “Maybe we should change that tonight.”

Oh. My. God.

“You better stop it,” I said.

“Stop what?” Lucien licked along his lower lip, and a sudden image of him swiping that tongue up my cock flashed through my head. “We’re just talking.”

I shifted in my seat and looked around. “You are *not* just talking.”

“No? What am I doing?”

I opened my mouth about to tell him that he was teasing me, but the waiter chose that exact moment to deliver my menu.

“Thank you,” I said.

“Of course—let me know when you’re ready to order.”

I nodded and flipped it open as he left, holding it up to block out the way Lucien was undressing me with his eyes. Jesus, how was I supposed to think about food? “Do you have any favorites? Any recommendations?”

“Oh I have plenty. But none of them have anything to do with eating what’s on *that* menu.”

I should’ve known better. Lucien was in a mood. One that was going to get me in a lot of trouble if I let it.

I pulled the menu out of my way and whispered, “Are you trying to drive me crazy?”

“No.” Lucien’s foot found mine under the table again, and he ran the toe of his shoe up behind my calf. “I’m trying to turn you on.”

I swallowed back a moan, reminding myself we were surrounded by other people. But then his foot moved up *between* my legs and I brought a hand up to cover my gasp, faking a cough.

“Uh oh,” Lucien said. “You’re not coming down with anything, are you?”

He wanted to play, did he? I could do that. I’d seen the way he responded when I flirted or teased him, and that was all he was doing.

Playing with me.

"Actually, I'm feeling a little *hot* and *bothered*…" I smoothed my hand over my chest and up my neck, then flicked open my top button. "Maybe I should get something to cool me down."

"Or maybe you should just undo the next button."

I looked at the tables surrounding us until Lucien's foot rubbed my cock again.

"Eyes on me, Kai. Now undo the next button."

I'd just been meaning to tease. But it seemed my response had given Lucien the green light he'd been waiting for, and I wanted to run straight toward it.

I trailed my fingers along my collarbone and down the strip of skin Lucien could see, teasing and flirting with the shirt edge until I got to the second button. When I slipped it free, Lucien growled.

"Christ." He shook his head, and the heat in that stare made my dick wake with a hunger that couldn't be sated anytime soon.

Lucien was going to tease me to death, wasn't he? Rile me up and make me beg for him to take me home. Or—I looked around, searching for a restroom—somewhere closer and private.

"Can I ask a question, *sir*?" I ran my finger over the third button but didn't undo it.

Lucien's eyes narrowed with interest and arousal. "You may."

"Are you my dom issuing orders right now, or"—I reached under the table to stroke his leg—"is this a game we can both play?"

He cursed, and that felt like a small victory. It was so sexy to see him get aroused by me, and that only made me want to push him even more. If he was going to torture my cock, along with my self-control, it was only fair I get to do the same.

Lucien threw back the rest of his drink and then leaned forward. "See, I'm not sure you can handle a game like that."

"No?"

He shook his head. "No. But if you'd like to try, come on. Play with me, little boy."

The challenge was one I couldn't resist, even though I knew I was way out of my league. The restaurant was packed, and it wouldn't take much for someone to look our way and get us both kicked out for indecency. And that

would be a shame, if only for those lobster crepes I wanted to come back for.

But Lucien was irresistible, and I wanted to play with him anywhere, anytime.

“Take off your jacket,” I said.

He cocked his head and then stood up. As he shrugged out of the jacket and placed it on the back of his chair, he did nothing to hide his erection that tented his pressed pants.

My mouth watered, my pulse kicked up, and when Lucien sat back down, he smirked as if to say, *Now what?*

His shirt was already unbuttoned to reveal the top of his chest, and it took me a second of deliberation before I said, “Can I have your belt?”

“My belt?”

“Yes. Please, sir.”

Lucien looked a little caught off guard by the request, but he complied. Scooting back in his chair to give me a view, he unhooked his belt and slid it free.

I took it from him, our hands brushing and sending sparks up my arm. “Thank you.”

The smooth leather belt hadn’t come from some store on the corner, that was for sure. It had the weight and metal that spoke of someone who took pride in their craft. I ran my fingers over it before folding it and running it across the back of my hand.

“Mmm. Feels good.” I flipped my hand over and tapped the belt against my palm. Lucien’s eyes were glued to the move. “I wonder if it would feel this good *every*where.”

Lucien went completely still. He didn’t react. Didn’t say a word. Only watched me stroking his belt as the waiter returned to our table.

“Have you made your selection?” the waiter asked me, clearly not catching the vibe we were throwing off.

“We have.” Lucien’s throat worked as he swallowed. “Get rid of everyone. I want to enjoy my dessert.”

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LUCIEN

THERE WAS ONLY so much self-control I had when Kai smacked my belt against his palm. All I could picture was the way it would redden that sweet ass.

Kai didn't say a word as the diners all left, only watched with wide eyes like he couldn't believe I had the power—or maybe it was the audacity—to make such a request happen.

He'd soon learn there wasn't anything I wouldn't do for my beautiful boy.

When the last person was gone and the door shut behind them, Kai looked back at me and said, "Holy shit."

My lips twisted. "You played that game a little too well. And while I don't mind the prying eyes, I have a feeling you might." I pushed my chair back from the table and curled a finger at him. "Come here."

He got to his feet, still gripping my belt. His arousal was clearly on display for me, and me alone, and maybe that was the reason I'd wanted to clear the restaurant. I didn't want to share Kai. Not with anyone.

Wasn't that a revelation?

"Not there," I said, and spread my legs wide. "Here."

He moved to stand between me and the table, and damn he made me wild. The scent of him, the sliver of skin I could see from his unbuttoned shirt. The trust in his eyes as he waited for my next instruction. Even with the full city view all around us, Kai was the most exquisite thing in the room.

With my hands on either side of his hips, I leaned in and tugged at the end of his shirt with my teeth, pulling it free from his pants. Kai bit his lip as he stared down at me, running his fingers over the back of my head to rest on my neck.

“I want you,” I growled, and the heat in his eyes that flared answered before he did.

“Then take me.”

I reached behind him and swept everything off the table, sending it clattering to the ground and not giving a single fuck.

“Unzip,” I said.

Kai’s breathing quickened as he unbuttoned and unzipped in record time.

“Goddamn, you’re perfect.” I shoved his clothes down to his ankles, removed his shoes, and got him completely naked from the waist down. I didn’t need anything in my way when I ate out every inch of my boy.

I trailed my fingers up the inside of his leg as I moved back to my seat, but removed my hand just before I reached his delicious cock.

“Up,” I said, and gestured to the table behind him.

Kai complied, shifting until his bare ass was up on the table, belt still in hand. I got to my feet, and Kai’s eyes followed me. He was as laser focused as I was, watching my every move. Trying to figure out what I was going to do next.

Poor boy. He had no clue about the beast he’d awoken.

I took a step forward and tapped his knee, and Kai parted his legs. Then I gripped the back of his neck and brushed my lips over the top of his.

“I don’t know about you.” I nipped at his lower lip, then reached for the belt. “But I’m ready to eat my fucking dessert. Lie back. It’s time to show me what’s on the menu.”

He slowly lowered himself until he was flat on the table and I was towering over him, and the trust in those stormy eyes was as much of a turn-on as his dripping cock.

I wanted to look at him *and* devour him. In the end, though, my need to touch him outweighed my patience.

“Hmm,” I said as I stroked the long belt before folding it over as he’d originally had it. “You asked a question earlier—what was that again? Would my belt feel as good on the rest of your body as it did on your hand?”

I brought my hands together to give myself enough slack before I snapped my wrists apart and caused a loud crack to echo around the restaurant.

Kai startled at the sound, and for a second I wondered if he'd take us to *Monaco*, but my boy was full of surprises. As he eyed the belt, his dick twitched.

"Oh would you look at that. You weren't just teasing me. You really *do* want to know what this feels like."

"Yes, sir."

How had I gotten so lucky to end up with such a tactile person? He was so curious about textures and sensations on his body that he was the perfect submissive.

I trailed the smooth, folded end of the belt down the top of his thigh to his knee, and when I brought it back up the inside toward his balls, he shivered.

So receptive, I thought, as I brought it back down to the outside of his thigh and gave him a little smack. He sucked in a breath, and those smokey eyes darkened. He was open to the belt, which was surprising. Finding out what Kai enjoyed, what he was curious about, reading the way his body reacted… It was intoxicating.

But that was something we'd have to play with later. I wanted to get my hands on him *now*.

I brushed my mouth along his inner thigh, pressing kisses as I made my way up his leg. The scent of his arousal grew stronger, drawing me in and making me salivate. This wasn't going to be a long, drawn-out fuck, but one that would do its job of taking the edge off until we got back home. It was easy to spend hours worshipping Kai's body, and even though the staff had been accommodating, I wouldn't keep them waiting all night.

I dropped my head and pushed his cock toward his stomach so I could tongue his sensitive balls. Kai moaned, the sound so erotic it made it difficult to keep on course and not just unzip and get inside him. But I wanted him out of his mind first. I drew my tongue up the underside of his shaft, planting my hands on his thighs as he bucked off the table, then flicked my tongue over his sensitive head.

Fuck, he was delicious. Salty, sweet, and all Kai.

"Lucien," he said as I reached for his cock and sucked at the tip. His hands were in my hair holding me in place, and while I'd usually order him

to keep them off until I said so, the feel of his fingers gripping my head and pulling me closer made my dick throb with need.

I swallowed every fucking inch of him, devouring him in the way I craved. He was better than any dessert, and I couldn't get enough.

The little noises he made, like he was trying not to be too loud, made me raise my head to look him in the eyes.

"You scream as loud as you fucking want with me."

He licked his lips and nodded, clenching the edges of the table as I dove back onto his cock. I wasn't taking it easy on him, and I hadn't planned on this and brought something to lube him with.

Didn't matter. I lifted off his dick, spread his cheeks wide, and spat before pushing my finger inside him. I worked one finger, then two, inside of his tight ass, then dove back onto his dick.

Kai began to tremble and moved his hands back to my head, spearing his fingers through my hair as he both tried to pull me closer and push me away. Like it was all too much and not enough.

Scissoring my fingers inside him, getting him nice and stretched, I lifted my mouth off him with a pop and tongued his slit.

"You be a good boy and don't come until I tell you."

His response was a few unintelligible sounds that had me grinning savagely as I straightened. I unbuttoned my pants, my eyes fixed on the gorgeous man splayed out for me, and as I reached inside my briefs, and pulled out my cock, Kai groaned.

"You want this?" I asked, then spat in my palm and stroked myself.

Kai nodded eagerly, the time for teasing and play now shoved aside in search of a satisfying ending. I rubbed my thumb over the pre-cum coating my head, and gave myself another couple of pulls before moving toward the real prize.

I hooked my hands under the backs of Kai's knees and tugged him to the very edge of the table, then took my dick and lined it up with his waiting hole.

"You ready, beautiful boy?"

Kai wrapped a hand around his cock and nodded. "Yes, sir."

Permission granted.

I surged inside him in one rough stroke, the force of my penetration shoving him up the table.

"So fucking sweet," I said between gritted teeth.

I dug my fingers into the soft skin of his thighs, knowing I'd leave bruises. But something about seeing my fingerprints on him made every possessive instinct inside me surface.

Kai stared up at me from beneath his hooded lids, his lips parted as he panted, trying to get used to the fullness. Then he licked his lower lip and nodded.

My balls tightened against my body as I slowly pulled out of him then drove back inside—and the cry that left him was a sound I would forever hear in my dreams.

I went at him hard then, need and desire the driving forces in my brain now, as the intense pleasure threatened to overwhelm and destroy my remaining control. But what did I expect when my dick was enveloped in the hottest, tightest body I'd ever been inside of?

Kai pumped his shaft with every pounding I gave him, clearly out of his mind with the same carnal feelings overtaking me. We were lost in one another, completely enraptured by the way the other's body was making us feel. And if someone had come in right then and told me the world was going to implode, I would've happily met the end buried inside him.

"Lucien…" Kai said, his voice somewhere between a breathy moan and shout as I tunneled in deep. I let go of his legs and moved over him, bracing my hands by his head as I crushed my mouth to his. Kai wound his legs around the back of mine, pulling me in as deep as I could get, and a shout ripped out of me.

I stilled, my dick throbbing inside of him, as I looked down into the most perfect face I'd ever seen in my life.

"You're so fucking beautiful," I said, then straightened and braced myself before I took hold of his legs again. "So beautiful, and all mine."

"Yours," he said, almost breathless.

Fuck self-control—all I wanted in that moment was to mark him in every way I could. I shoved back inside him so deep he cried out, but then begged for more. His fist tightened around his cock as he kept pace with my thrusts, his cum leaking from the head of his dick down his fingers.

As much as I wanted to lick him clean, I couldn't stop now. I was getting close, so close to coming inside Kai. The only sounds in the room were our moans and the slapping of our bodies with every drive.

"Oh God, Lucien," Kai said, jerking himself off erratically now.

I gripped his legs harder, thrusting into him faster, faster, faster—

“Now,” I said, and Kai shouted, his orgasm ripping through him at the permission I gave him and coating his stomach.

My world exploded with the force of my climax. I kept pumping inside him, filling him completely until my cum began to leak out of his ass.

Goddamn. It was a good thing I was holding on to Kai’s legs as I slowed and felt my knees nearly give out. That had never happened before—but then again, everything with Kai was different.

When I was able to, I leaned down, moving my hands on either side of him on the table but keeping us fully joined.

“Look at you following orders like a good little submissive,” I said, eyeing the belt I’d tossed to the side. “Guess that means you’ll be getting a reward instead of a lesson tonight.”

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LUCIEN

A WEEK LATER I sat at the round table with the rest of my brothers, all of us called together by Alessio. It was standard that we all attend if one of us was dealing with a particularly nasty problem so we could all be on the same page and help in whatever way we could.

I checked my phone while King finished up a call of his own and brought up the photo I'd taken of Kai and me out on the deck of Fable Lounge last night. He had the thin gold chain I'd just given him on proud display, holding it up for the photo with his thumb. The sunset behind us was extraordinary, but it had nothing on the way Kai's entire face was lit up. It was a complete one-eighty from the first time I'd seen him, and the fact he could be like that with me meant everything.

"Ooh, what are you looking at with such a smile, *mon cher*?" Benoit said beside me. Quick as lightning, he snatched my phone from my hand and looked at the screen. "Oh."

"*Oh*? What the hell does that mean?"

"It means it's lovely, but no one is naked in this photo."

"Fuck off." I grabbed the phone out of his hands and cleared the screen before shoving it in my pocket.

Benoit smirked and lifted a shoulder. "Some king of sex you are. I think you've turned marshmallow."

"Excuse me?"

"You know, marshmallow. All soft and gooey."

"Find me a whip and I'll show you soft and gooey."

“Now that’s what I’m talking about.” Benoit winked as King called the meeting to order, flanked by Shep and Alessio.

“Thanks for being here for our brother, Lucien,” he said. “As you all know by now, Lucien’s club, The Veil, was blown to shit by Rupert McGuire. We’ve compiled everything we know about him—his businesses, family, and assets—which you can find on our private server.” King nodded at our tablets, and I opened the folder we’d been sent and skimmed through it.

Ex-wife in New Hampshire… No kids… No living direct relatives…

Translation: no one would miss him. Good to know, though unnecessary. I wasn’t planning to set Lachlan on him, after all.

“Alessio can take over from here,” King said, taking a seat.

Alessio stood up and crossed his arms. “So this motherfucker got his panties in a twist when Lucien kicked him out of his club. That would probably be enough cause for a pissant like him, but then he lost his little plaything to Lucien too.”

I started to object to calling Kai a plaything, but Alessio held his hand up.

“Sorry, *Kai*,” he said, and I nodded. “Rupert, being an ugly prick with a small dick, couldn’t handle the fact that anyone could offer something better to Kai, got butthurt about it, probably stewed over it for a while, then decided to do something stupid, like blow up Lucien’s building.” Alessio clicked the tiny remote in his hand, and a 3D image hovered over the center of the table.

Theo’s lips twisted. “He *is* an ugly prick.”

“And I don’t want to even imagine his small dick,” Benoit said with a shudder.

Alessio clicked again, and a bank statement popped up. “It seems Mom and Pops left him a sizeable chunk of change, most of which he keeps in offshore accounts—that I now have full access to.”

“Nicely done,” Shep murmured, his hands steepled in front of him as he watched the presentation with intense focus.

“Assets.” The image changed, and Alessio scratched his jaw. “His main house is on East Sixty-Ninth Street, and yes, I’m sure he chose that number for a stupid-ass reason. Worth about twelve million at its last valuation. Also owns a place in the Hamptons as well as Miami. Net worth, about

fifty-eight million, almost all of which comes from family, since being the owner of a gallery only nets him about five hundred K a year."

"Great, so we take it all and leave him in Miami for the alligators to feast on," Lachlan said, looking a little too excited about the prospect. "I'm in."

Alessio nodded at me. "I'll let you handle this next bit."

When the image changed to different candid shots of Rupert with young guys, none of which were Kai, I clenched the arms of the chair and shoved to my feet.

"It's not just that Rupert's a pathetic piece of shit, it's that he treats the guys he's with like they're nothing. He buys and trades them like fucking stock and then uses them, knowing they'll do whatever he wants because they're coming from the streets and have no better options. He preys on these guys. He's the worst kind of human."

A tense silence descended, and I could read the reactions on each of their faces. Every one of us abhorred guys like Rupert, and now he was fucking with one of us.

"Those alligators are looking better and better," Shep said, his jaw tight.

I agreed, but somewhere in the back of my mind was a tiny voice warning me of repercussions. Whatever we did to this asshole, I didn't want any of the blowback landing on Kai. He might loathe Rupert and want to see him punished, but I didn't think that included feeding him to reptiles.

Such a shame.

"As much as I'd *like* to take Rupert for a little trip to Florida, I think for now the best course of action is neutering the motherfucker."

"Literally?" Lachlan said, eyes gleaming.

"Figuratively."

He huffed and sat back in his seat.

"Someone like Rupert measures his dick by how much money and power he holds. I think it's time to show him mine is a million times bigger."

"Ooh…" Benoit licked his lips, his eyes dropping below my belt. "We about to get a little show-and-tell?"

"You are *not*. But I'm about to fuck his shit up. I want his money drained, his assets seized. This dipshit has been making high-profile sales

and forging their certificates of authenticity. Kai knows where those certificates are."

"Ah, I see." King rubbed his jaw, perceptive as ever. "You want to go in and get them."

"I do. We expose the fraud taking place at his gallery and his business will immediately tank. His accounts will already be drained courtesy of Alessio, so no help to be found there, and how do you pay for your million-dollar properties when the money stops coming in?"

"True." Benoit pursed his lips. "You're really not going to touch him?"

"I didn't say that."

Then I turned to our resident enforcer, and Lachlan sat up a little straighter. "Say more."

"Whatever night we decide to go, Rupert needs to be there."

Lachlan gave a wolfish smile. "Go on."

"It'll be you and me. I don't want to chance anyone seeing a whole parade of guys breaking and entering his house."

"I can get access," Alessio piped up. "Make sure to have eyes on you, give intel."

"Perfect." I nodded. "We get in, secure that fucker, get the certificates, and then…"

"And then?" Theo asked as though I'd been telling a bedtime story.

"Then Lachlan is going to give me ten minutes alone with him."

"Wait, what?" Lachlan screwed his nose up. "I have to leave?"

"Look, it's going to be hard enough for *me* to leave him breathing," I said with a little more force than I intended. "I don't want to have to worry about keeping you under control."

"And who's going to keep *you* under control?" King's voice was cool as can be as he looked to my curled fists.

"That won't be a problem."

He raised a brow. "Are you sure?"

No, I wasn't. But I'd had years of training in learning to control my emotions. Years of training in showing restraint. I was hoping I'd be able to apply some of that when I came face to face with that bastard.

"I'm sure. I'll fuck him up, but I'll leave him breathing."

"Okay," King said, then looked to Lachlan. "You are to defer to Lucien when you get the go-ahead. I don't want to get a phone call requiring a cleanup crew. Got it?"

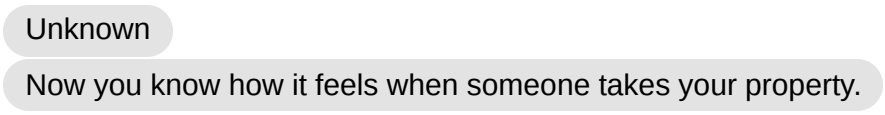
Lachlan held his hands up. “Got it. I don’t like it, but I’ve got it.”

“Very good.” King’s sharp gaze swept over everyone at the table, before landing on Alessio. “Find out what this Rupert’s daily schedule is. Does he follow a pattern and so forth? Get the information together, along with any plans he might have in the evenings. If you can hack into his cell, computer, Wi-Fi—whatever it is you do to know more about these fuckers than they do themselves—do it. Then get with Lucien to work out a day or night that suits.”

As King and the rest of my brothers started to work out what their specific role in this takedown would be, I felt a sense of determination rise. Rupert wasn’t going to know what hit him by the time I was done with him—other than my fist before I walked out his door.

My phone vibrated in my pocket just as I’d been about to sit back down, and I pulled it out and saw a text from an unknown number. Usually I’d just delete it and not give it another thought. But as my finger hovered over the trash can, something started to scratch at my brain.

Maybe it was what we were all gathered here talking about today. Or maybe it was the fact I rarely, if ever, got spam texts. But something wouldn’t let me delete it. Instead, I tapped the message open, and what I read had every muscle in my body tensing.



And below that was a link.

Blood rushed to my head, the ringing in my ears getting louder and louder until it drowned out everyone’s voices. Then I pressed the link and a video appeared.

It was a video of Kai. He was standing in what looked like the small café at the corner of my block, purchasing his morning tea. That wasn’t anything new—he’d told me he’d wanted to experiment with some new flavors now that he’d worked out the way he liked to drink it, so I’d suggested the little place on the corner.

Lachlan’s guy should’ve been there to accompany him, so where the hell was he?

Seconds later, as Kai moved off to the back of the café, a tall, muscled guy with his hat pulled down low grabbed hold of his arm. Kai startled, and just as he was about to yell out, the goon clamped a hand over his mouth. He jerked in the fucker's grip before he was muscled toward the back door, but he didn't kick or fight, which made me think something—a gun or maybe a knife—had been at his back.

Then the video ended.

I pressed play and watched the video again and again, my brain still not allowing me to believe what I was seeing.

Fuck. Fuck.

Rupert had kidnapped Kai.

He'd taken him from right under my nose.

Right on my fucking street.

My blood boiled and my vision turned red, until I finally tossed my phone into the middle of the table. Everyone fell silent and looked up at me.

"Lucien?" Benoit touched the fist I was flexing, imagining it was crushing Rupert's skull. "Lucien, are you okay?"

I said nothing as Alessio reached for the phone and hit play. His curse echoed around the room as one by one each of my brothers watched the unthinkable happen.

When it finally got to King and played through, I could barely see through the rage now coursing through me, but I did hear, "So, Lucien, how's that plan of yours feel now?"

I ground my molars, my mind still caught on the words, the video, the fact Kai was gone, then I looked over at King and spat out, "New plan. I'm going to kill that motherfucker."

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KAI

THIS WASN'T REALLY happening. Any minute now, I was going to wake up in Lucien's arms and tell him all about the nightmare I'd had. He would rub my back and hold me tight, quietly listening before soothing me with his words and wiping away the bad dream with his kisses.

It was strange how it felt like he was still with me, even though this was the last place I'd ever want Lucien to be. Rupert's home may be a sprawling townhome on the Upper East Side, but it had always felt like a prison I deserved.

I held tight to thoughts of Lucien as I sat motionless at Rupert's dining room table. It was the first time I'd ever been invited to dinner with him like this, with an enormous spread of roasted chicken and sides between us fit for ten people. When I was here before, I'd taken meals in the room he kept me in—and right now I would've preferred to be there rather than sitting here looking at his face.

He looked positively gleeful, which made my stomach turn.

Rupert was proud of himself. Patting himself on the back at not only blowing up Lucien's club, but by kidnapping me in the middle of the day.

I hadn't even seen it coming. It'd become my new norm to venture out to the café by Lucien's building and try a different flavor of tea every day. Sometimes Lucien came with me; other times, like today, I'd gone with one of the security guards. I was always too embarrassed for him to come inside, because it made other people look at me like I was someone famous

enough to have security. They usually appeased me by waiting outside the door.

God, he was going to get in trouble because of me, wasn't he? I should've just let him do his job and come inside, but how the hell was I supposed to know someone could just walk in the back door of a café and steal a person?

Had anyone seen? Had they called the cops? Did Lucien know?

Then another thought crossed my mind. What if Lucien thought I'd left because I *wanted* to?

I felt myself start to hyperventilate, but I couldn't give Rupert that satisfaction. I had to think of a plan. I had to get myself out of here.

As I tried to breathe and fight the panic, Rupert narrowed his eyes and pointed his fork at my untouched plate.

"The food's not there for decoration."

I didn't want his food. If I took a bite, I'd throw it back up anyway.

I didn't want his conversation either. Maybe he'd realize I wasn't worth it and throw me out.

"You're being a rude little shit." Rupert wiped his mouth with his cloth napkin before dropping it back in his lap.

It was the first time in weeks I'd seen him, and I took the opportunity now to really *look* at him. While I'd never seen him through rose-colored glasses, there had always been a sort of acceptance about finding *something* about him that I found attractive. It was the only way I could get through the nights he called me into his bed. But for the life of me I couldn't remember what that was now, because I could see him for what he really was. Someone vile. Ugly inside and out. Someone who could never compare in any way to Lucien.

He was older, and he really looked it tonight. There were heavy bags under his eyes and lines that framed his mouth. A receding hairline, heavy with grey, and ears that stuck out a bit. His skin was a reddish color naturally, though it seemed to only get darker the longer I ignored him. Maybe it'd be purple soon.

Rupert watched me for a long minute and then sniffed and resumed cutting his chicken a little too hard.

"Fine. Have it your way. I'm happy to talk."

Of course he was. He'd always liked the sound of his own voice.

“I did a little digging on your new *boyfriend*,” he sneered, his fork in midair, then he bit down on the chicken and chewed like some masticating cow. It took everything I had not to gag as he swallowed. “Lucien Vale. What an adventure you must’ve had with him. Rich, young—some might say handsome.”

Fuck you, I thought, while trying not to let his words affect me. Even if they were hitting a little too close to home.

“I bet he looked like the perfect mark to someone like you. The perfect *out*.” Rupert cocked his head. “That’s it, isn’t it? You were having fun with him. *Enjoying* him. Tell me, Kai, did you really think I’d just let you go? That I’d let you be free?”

Tears pricked at my eyes as his words tore away the fragile armor I’d been building. I’d tried so hard to keep my walls up when I left here, to protect myself in case this very moment happened. But the longer I stayed with Lucien, the more I’d let them crumble—until I did believe I was free.

And I had been. If only for a few short weeks.

The loud clang of Rupert’s fork on the plate startled me.

“You’ll look at me when I’m talking to you, *boy*.”

I gritted my teeth in an effort not to tell him to go fuck himself. All that would get me was some physical pain to go along with my emotional anguish. Instead, I raised my eyes to his.

“That’s better.” He picked up his knife and pointed it at me. “Did your new beau tell you about the little celebration I threw for the two of you?”

The explosion. That had to be what he was talking about. And the gleeful tone he had over destroying Lucien’s business, and almost Lucien himself, made me clench my hands where they rested on the table.

“Fireworks.” The gleam in his eyes was so bright it was like he was seeing it all over again. “You should’ve seen it.” Rupert’s attention shifted to my hands. “Oh dear, did I say something to upset you?” He dropped his knife to the table and shoved his chair back, and the hair on the back of my neck stood tall.

I held my breath as he came around the table, every nerve on edge as he stopped by my side and reached for my wrist. He yanked it up and looked at my balled fist.

“You going to hit me, Kai?”

I swallowed. “The thought crossed my mind.”

It was the first thing I'd said all night, and it was clearly not what Rupert had expected. Shock registered on his ugly face, then, quick as the snake he was, he reached for my shirt and dragged me out of my seat until I was on my feet.

"You think you can hurt *me*?" he spat, his breath hot and reeking of alcohol. "I dare you to try, you pathetic little shit. You're a nobody. A nothing. Hit me—see what happens."

I wanted to. I wanted to so fucking badly. But I wanted the *why* more.

"Why am I even here if you hate me so much?" I said. "Is it just to get back at Lucien?"

Rupert's eyes narrowed to slits. "You think I'm going to let some sex club owner tell me where I can and can't go? What I can and can't do with what belongs to me?" He drew me forward another inch. "And yes, you do belong to me. I paid a pretty penny for you, which means Lucien Vale owes me big for taking you."

"You don't think burning his club down is payment enough?"

He shook his head then let go of my shirt. "You've got a mouth on you now. That come from your boyfriend? Because that's not going to work for me."

"Why, because you like it better when I shut up? Stay locked in my room like a prisoner?"

"Yes," he said. "You'll do what I tell you, when I tell you."

No. I wasn't doing this again. Not when my eyes were open to a life I'd never realized existed.

I backed away and then turned to make a run for it. The dining room was off the main foyer, and as I rounded the corner for the door, I hit a wall of steel in the form of the massive guy who'd kidnapped me.

"Going somewhere?" he said, staring down at me with an expression that said I was fucked. He could bench-press me one-handed; there was no way I was getting past a guy like that.

There had to be another way.

The room Rupert always kept me in had no windows, so once I was up there, there was no getting out. I needed to escape before he locked me up.

I put my hands up to placate the guard and started back toward the dining room, but as soon as I was out of grabbing distance, I ran through the foyer toward the back of the house.

My heart hammered as they both shouted behind me, but I was small and I was quick, and those were the only two things going for me right now. I could hear the guard getting closer behind me, and I chose the narrow path between Rupert's desk and chair to slip through easily, giving me a few precious extra seconds to slam the door shut after me. Every obstacle counted, and I heard the guard curse and kick the chair out of the way.

But every muscle in my body seized when I saw two more guards blocking the back door. My mind froze up before I could think of another route, and that was all the time Rupert and the first guard needed to block me in from behind.

I was trapped.

"You thought it would be that easy, did you?" Rupert spat, breathing heavier than he should be from the chase. "You've forgotten where you belong."

"I don't belong here," I said quietly, my eyes on the floor.

"What was that?"

I lifted my head. "I *said*, I don't belong here."

"No, you belong out on the streets, remember? You'd rather be back out there than here? I can make that happen."

Empty threats. There was no way he'd lose his "pretty pennies" by throwing me out. He wanted to torture me. But he wanted to torture Lucien more.

"He'll come for me, you know," I said. The thought hadn't even entered my mind, yet the words came out with a conviction I felt to my bones. Lucien *would* know I wouldn't leave him. He was already on Rupert's trail, already knew the secrets I'd given him. It was only a matter of time before he found me. And from what I'd learned about his brothers, they were all more powerful than Rupert could dream of.

Rupert scoffed and exchanged glances with the three guards. "We're *counting* on your lover boy to make an appearance."

I lifted my chin. "You're underestimating him."

Rupert's nostrils flared. "And you're pissing me off. What did you think, that you were going to stay with him? Live some happily ever after? You don't think a man like that is fucking every person in that club of his?" He put his face in close to mine and fingered the necklace at my throat. "This from him?"

He didn’t wait for an answer, tearing it from my neck so that the thin gold chain broke in two. I gasped and grabbed at my throat, my skin stinging.

Rupert grabbed hold of my arm, his fingers biting into my bicep hard enough to leave bruises as he hauled me in and sniffed at my neck.

“You smell like him,” he growled, and then shoved me away so hard I almost stumbled. “Go and take a fucking shower. The only person you’re going to smell like from now on is me.”

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LUCIEN

EVERYONE HAD THEIR own ideas on just how to accomplish my new plan, and they weren't quiet about sharing them.

Their voices echoed off the stone walls, joining the chaos in my mind, all of it so loud I couldn't think.

"We do have a jet and a private island," Theo mused, arching a brow King's way. "No one would miss him there."

"My private sanctuary isn't about to become a dumping ground for our problems," King said.

"Speaking of dumping, why not just throw him *out* of the jet?" When everyone turned to stare at Benoit, he shrugged. "How is that any worse?"

As they all began to talk over each other again, I closed my eyes, but all I saw was red.

Rupert had taken Kai. I'd underestimated the fucker. I assumed he'd already taken his revenge—and in the process, I'd risked the one person I'd sworn to protect.

"*Shut. The fuck. Up.*"

The words exploded out of me without warning, and the room went dead silent as they all stopped and stared.

I swallowed and lowered my balled fists to the table. "Just give me a damn minute."

My entire body vibrated with fury as flames licked along my veins, fueling the fire raging inside me. Kai's angelic face frozen in fear was all I

could see as the video played over and over. Until finally I raised my eyes, sweeping them over each and every one of my brothers.

"Fucking hell," Lachlan said, reading my murderous expression—he knew exactly where my mind was wandering. Into the darkest of shadows, where he liked to play.

But before I went there, I turned to Alessio. "Find him," I growled, and he shot to his feet.

"On it," he said, eager to put his skills to use. He hurried out of the room to his cave, and I turned to King.

"You have any objections to what I'm about to lay out next?"

"No. But be sure." King's eyes narrowed. "Once you go there, you can't come back."

I didn't give a fuck.

Sure, Lachlan was usually the go-to for situations like this. But I was going to take out the trash this time around. Rupert had gone too far. My club was one thing. Kai was a whole other.

That fucker was going to pay, and I was going to cash the check.

"Too late."

King inclined his head. "In that case, all I ask is that we take a moment to come up with a plan. Kai is an innocent. Let's keep him that way."

"*Oui*," Benoit agreed. "And I kind of enjoy my freedom."

That went without saying. There was no way I would ever put any of my brothers in danger. It was the number one oath we took when becoming kings. But if push came to shove, I would leave them free and clear and take Rupert out on my own.

One way or another, that fucker had seen his last sunrise.

"Okay, then." I straightened. "The new plan needs guns."

I didn't bother waiting for a response. No one was going to talk me out of this. Not that they seemed to want to, judging by their reactions to the video.

I stormed out of the conference room and headed toward the armory.

"Question," Benoit said, jogging to keep up with me. "Once we have the guns, then what?"

I hadn't gotten that far yet. But one thing I did know: I wasn't going to this party without a gift. And that gift was going to contain lead confetti.

"Okay, well, we can get to that part in a minute," Benoit said.

“We can’t count out the possibility he has more than one security guard,” Shep said from behind us. “Lachlan’s guys should be able to give us more on that once they get to their posts.”

I grunted, not giving a shit how many assholes were there. I was ready to take on an entire fucking army if it meant getting Kai back.

“Alessio should be able to get a few good angles of his brownstone, too,” Theo said as I reached the armory.

I held my wrist up under the scanner and, when the bolts disengaged, yanked open the iron door.

“Will definitely need the masks and hoods too,” he continued. “That neighborhood will be fitted with every kind of security camera you can think of. Not sure if you all remember, but my face has kind of been plastered everywhere lately, thanks to my pain-in-the-ass brother.”

I stilled as I was reminded of my time in Monaco with Kai, and how happy he’d been to meet Theo. He’d be devastated if anything were to happen to His Royal Highness on account of him.

I turned to see all my brothers crowded just inside the entryway of the armory.

“Problem, Luc?” Lachlan said, the only one brave enough to step closer.

“I understand why you’re here. But if any of you want out, I can do this myself.”

The words were barely out of my mouth before every one of them rejected that offer outright, with King summing up their views with a simple “No.”

Shep squeezed my shoulder. “You’re always there for the rest of us. Let us be there for you.”

I looked around the room, at each of them nodding their support. It meant a lot that these men would put themselves on the line—not only for me, but for Kai.

“Thank you,” I said, as Alessio joined us in the armory, a laptop in his hands.

“Found him. This fucker’s obviously asking for it, because he took Kai back to his place on Sixty-Ninth Street.”

Of course he had. There wasn’t a good idea in that asshole’s brain, and this was the dumbest one yet. I knew exactly where he had my boy, and there was nothing to stop me from getting to him.

With my destination clear, I grabbed two guns off the wall, along with a box of cartridges, and headed for the door. King stepped in front of me, blocking the way out.

“Let me go,” I said, but Shep moved in beside him, putting up a wall I would have to bust through.

“You’re not going anywhere half-cocked,” King said.

“He’s right. Half-cocked is never a good idea. Fully cocked or bust,” Benoit added.

“We need to think this through, like King said.” Theo moved to my right. “Make sure we’re not traced, that every one of us has an assignment—and, you know, maybe let *us* grab a weapon or two before you leave.”

“The security team is at Rupert’s place,” Lachlan said, his phone to his ear. He listened for another beat and then added, “Looks like one guard outside, possible two additional inside. Waiting for confirmation.”

I narrowed my eyes on Lachlan. “Are you talking about some of the same security team of yours that let them take Kai?”

Lachlan held up a finger. “Watch it.”

“Watching it was what *they* were supposed to be doing.”

“Do you have a problem having more bodies there to stake things out? Because I can tell them to leave.”

“Fine. Do it. They’re useless anyway.”

Lachlan lunged in my direction, and I spread my arms, welcoming him to try to start shit. With the way I was feeling right now, not even our resident enforcer would be smart to fuck with me.

“*Enough*.” King’s voice reverberated off the walls, and then he faced me. “We know you’re worried, but infighting isn’t helping anyone. We stay here. Walk through a plan. And then we wait until it’s dark to make our move. Understood?”

Every fiber in my body rebelled at the order, even as the logical side of my mind tried to tell me this was the right thing to do. Every second away from Kai was torture, but it was nothing compared to what he had to be going through.

Would Rupert take out his anger on Kai? That was a given. It was just a matter of how much and how bad, and I couldn’t let it happen.

“It has to be now,” I said, and turned away from them to pace the room, feeling like a caged animal. “We’re not leaving him there.”

“Understandable,” Benoit said. “But if we go in guns blazing without a strategy, that will put your Kai in more danger. A stray bullet? You want to risk that to get to him sooner?”

Fuck. When did Benoit become the voice of reason?

I cursed and set the guns down before running my hands over my face in frustration.

“How long?” I said.

“Until dark?” Alessio checked the time on the laptop. “Two hours.”

A hundred and twenty agonizing minutes.

“Fine,” I said, letting out an irritated sigh. “But you better start strategizing. Because come hell or high water, the second that sun sets tonight, I’m out.”

I glared at every single one of them. “And I don’t give a fuck who’s standing in my way.”

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KAI

OF COURSE I'D been locked up after my attempt at running away. Rupert had always had a security guard around, but never more than one, and I hadn't expected them to be stationed at the back door.

He really wasn't going to let me go this time, was he?

I hugged my knees closer to my chest on the single bed with its plain white sheets, surrounded by the same boring white walls with no windows. Nothing had changed about the room I'd spent so much time in. There were still no pictures of any kind on the walls, which I'd always found odd, considering Rupert ran an art gallery.

I glanced at the bathroom, which was just as stark as the room it adjoined, and narrowed my eyes at the showerhead like it had done something to offend me personally. Rupert wanted me to shower, to wash off any lingering part of Lucien from my skin, but he could go to hell. Lucien was the only thing getting me through right now, and every time I burrowed my nose beneath my shirt, I could smell his cologne. He'd hovered over me on the couch, fully dressed for his meeting at Libertine, and looking and smelling so delicious that I tried my best to convince him to stay.

Dropping my head to my knees, I closed my eyes and focused on that last memory, holding it tight. I didn't know how many hours had passed since I'd been taken, but Lucien had to know by now that I wasn't at home. He had to know I never wanted to leave him. I'd told him that, right? God, I

should've told him that every day, because he made me feel *worth* something every day.

Unlike the last time I was here, I didn't feel resigned to my fate. Everything in my life had changed so much during my time with Lucien, and now I knew what I could have. What I didn't have to settle for.

I didn't have to put up with this shit. I didn't have to cower before Rupert, or do what he wanted me to, and I sure as hell didn't have to live here like this with him. I would just bide my time until I found a way out. This wasn't forever. My future included Lucien and books and travel. It included my working toward my GED and finding my own path. And whatever that was, it meant ensuring that no one else would ever end up in the situation I found myself in—at the beck and call of someone with money and status. Before meeting Lucien, I thought all rich guys were the same, but that wasn't true at all. Some people actually didn't use their power and money to harm.

A key turning in the lock made my heart jump, that familiar initial panic rising within me.

I forced myself to breathe normally. There was nothing Rupert could say or do that would change anything.

The door was pushed open with a loud thud against the opposite wall, as though Rupert wanted to announce his presence.

News flash, asshole: the chill of something evil formed icicles in the air when you stopped outside the door.

I shifted to my feet, trying to gain whatever ground I could against Rupert, as he walked inside and slammed the door shut behind him. He gave me a calculating once-over, and I could tell by the displeasure on his face that he knew I'd disobeyed his direct order.

Good. Suck on that, you miserable bastard.

"I thought I told you to shower."

It didn't escape my attention that *he* had done so, and the damp hair at the sides of his temples and redder-than-usual cheeks made my stomach revolt. He was dressed in a pair of ugly-ass silk boxer shorts and matching robe. He probably thought he looked sexy in that getup, but he just looked ridiculous. Especially when I'd seen Lucien in *his* robe.

I wasn't going to think about that, though. Not right now. I didn't want to taint his image with this gross picture of Rupert. There was only one reason Rupert had come here straight from the shower, and the idea of his

touching me in any way made me wrap an arm around my waist to stop from hurling.

“Kai?”

I jutted my chin up with as much defiance as I could muster. “I don’t take orders from you anymore.”

“Is that right?” Rupert’s lip curled as he walked over to me. “Then maybe I’ll just have to force you.”

He grabbed hold of my arm, the same one he’d yanked me out of my seat by at dinner, and the sting from those bruises shot through me. I gritted my teeth, refusing to cry out or show any signs of weakness, as he dragged me toward the bathroom door.

“I told you,” Rupert said, putting his extensive weight and muscle into pulling me inside the sterile room. “I won’t have you smelling like *him*. Not when you’re about to be with me.”

I shuddered. The idea of letting anyone—let alone *this* disgusting human—anywhere near me after Lucien felt like a fate worse than death.

Not caring how much it hurt, I ripped my arm free of his cruel grasp and backed up in the small en suite until I felt the tile wall behind me.

“I’d rather be dead than let you touch me again.”

Rupert looked unimpressed by my show of bravado, though. He smirked and leaned in to turn on the water.

“You don’t think that could be arranged?”

Honestly, it had never crossed my mind until this very second. But if he was a man capable of forcing himself on someone, of *buying* someone like a piece of property, how much worse was disposing of someone?

“Don’t tempt me, Kai. I have my ways. And while your ass may be as sweet as your face, it’s not worth all that much to me if I can’t get inside it.”

Another violent shudder racked me, his words so vile I again almost retched. The only reason I didn’t was that I hadn’t eaten anything all day.

With the water running, Rupert turned to see me still plastered to the wall. “Get undressed,” he barked.

“Go to hell.”

He crossed the small space and grabbed my wrists, hauling me in until our noses touched.

“I dare you to say that again.”

I knew what I was about to do was risky—stupid, even, considering I had no family who would be worried if I disappeared. But somewhere in

the back of my mind, I kept hearing Lucien's deep, calming voice reassuring me that I'd always have a safe place with him. That he wanted me and cared about me.

He would be looking for me.

He would notice, and care, if I just disappeared.

But I'd be damned if I did it quietly.

"Go. To. *Hell*," I said, punctuating the last word by spitting in Rupert's face.

He jerked back. "You little *fuck*."

He threw me to the ground, and I landed hard, my knees cracking into the cold marble as he wiped the back of his hand across his cheek where I'd nailed him.

"Take your fucking clothes off or I'm going to call in one of my men to hold you while I *strip* them off."

He would, too. I could tell by the determined set of his jaw. Rupert wouldn't let me win. Tonight he was all about showing me who was boss. But I would not lie down and roll over.

Never again.

"Fuck you."

Rupert's eyes filled with rage as he loomed over me. "Suit yourself. But the only person getting fucked tonight is *you*."

He started toward the bathroom door, about to go and call in his "restraints," but I wasn't staying where I was. No way I was going to cower in here and wait for him to come back and do what he wanted with me.

I surged to my feet, despite my aching knees, and, with a single-mindedness I didn't know I possessed, bolted straight for him. Rupert was just about at the door, and as he went to reach for the handle, I tackled him with as much force as I could, slamming him face-first into the door.

"*Fuck*." Blood poured out of his nose with the impact, and I took advantage of his momentary distraction to swing at him. Somehow he was able to block the blow, but my nail still caught him across the face, drawing blood.

It was satisfying to see the red marring his skin, and I almost smiled, proud that I'd hurt him in any way.

"You motherfucking *shit*," he growled, shoving me so hard I fell to the ground, slamming up against the side of the bed.

I barely felt it, too caught up in the sight of the blood gushing down his robe to care.

He pointed a bloody finger at me. “You’re gonna pay for that.”

“It was worth it,” I said, which seemed to piss him off even more.

“We’ll see how you feel about it tomorrow.” Rupert gave me a sadistic smile that would’ve sent tremors of fear through me before. Now, though, I only felt determined. I’d hurt him tonight. I could hurt him again tomorrow. Maybe even escape.

As he slammed the door shut and locked it up, I looked at the smeared fingerprints he’d left on the wall and smiled to myself.

Fuck him. I was going to do whatever it took to get back to Lucien—and make sure Rupert paid.

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LUCIEN

TURNED OUT I didn't have to blow past any of my brothers the second the sun went down, because we were already suited up and in separate SUVs by then.

The plan was set, and each of us had been outfitted with our weapons of choice, not to mention we all wore Alessio's hidden cameras, earpieces, and mics. This was far from our first rodeo, but it *was* the first time we were taking down someone who'd fucked with me personally.

With Alessio back at headquarters to give us the rundown in real time, Benoit already on stakeout across from Rupert's townhome, and Lachlan and King in the lead SUV, I rode in the second SUV with Shep and Theo. Even though my blood ran hot with rage, on the outside I was the picture of deadly calm and focus. I didn't want small talk. I didn't want distractions.

What I wanted was Kai.

"Guard Alpha is on the move," Benoit said. "He just stepped out of the residence and is on alert out front."

"And Guard Bravo?" King asked.

"Still inside," Alessio replied. "I've got eyes on Guard Charlie manning the back door from inside the house."

Only three. That was a big mistake on Rupert's part. With the way I was feeling, I could've taken them all with my bare hands, though I couldn't promise things wouldn't get messy. Having my brothers with me was definitely the right move.

"Any sign of Kai?" I said.

There was no response at first, and then someone said, “Negative. No eyes on him or the target.”

The target. Rupert. I kept my hand on the outside of my hooded trench coat, feeling the outline of the gun holstered there. I had a feeling I wouldn’t need to use it, not when my fists were ready to do damage, but it was there if things got out of hand.

“Group one, ready for drop-off.”

Because of the way the townhome was positioned, getting to the back of the house wasn’t easy. Lachlan and King would be dropped by the vacant Pack & Ship on the corner, scale the fire escape, and make their way across the joined roofs of the stretch of townhomes packed in together. Once they were in place on Rupert’s, they’d enter through the back and incapacitate Guard Bravo while our team did the same to Alpha from the front.

“Drop-off complete,” Lachlan said, to which Benoit replied, “Great. Get moving, Spider-Man.”

As King and Lachlan navigated the Manhattan skyline, we pulled up on the opposite side of the road to the brownstone and I got my first glimpse of Kai’s prison.

I flexed my hand around the butt of my gun, and Theo reached across the seat and touched my arm.

“Hey, man, you good?”

“Fucking peachy.”

“I’m getting more…murderous, which I support wholeheartedly. But maybe keep your finger off the trigger until we get inside.”

He had a point. With the way I was feeling it would only take a soft breeze to make me squeeze the damn thing.

“We’re going to get him back,” Theo said as he stared at the street lamp outside of Rupert’s, waiting for our cue.

I didn’t bother responding, instead glancing at my watch, counting the seconds as the hand ticked slowly around the face—and when it hit the hour, the lights on the block went dark.

That was our signal.

We pulled our masks down over our faces, the intricate metal concealing our identities as we shoved open the doors to the SUV and made a dash across the street. We only had sixty seconds before Alessio turned the lights back on, and we needed to be in place. Wouldn’t want to alert the

neighborhood of our presence, now would we? Just like we didn't want one of them to see us breaking and entering—or anything else unsavory.

We'd been right in assuming the area would be crawling with cameras, but all those grainy security cams would get were black figures at best.

"King, you in place?" Shep said into his mic.

"Affirmative."

I narrowed my eyes, pulling my hood over my head and zeroing in on the guard pacing the stoop of the brownstone. He was a big motherfucker. The element of surprise was going to get us inside tonight.

Well, that and our guns.

"I'll take Guard Alpha, as discussed," Shep said from behind. "Once he's out of the way, you and Theo get inside. Guard Bravo—"

"Is mine," Theo interrupted. "King has Guard Charlie, and Lucien and Lachlan will look for Kai and the target."

It wouldn't be long until Kai was back in my arms, where he belonged, and that was the visual I kept in the forefront of my mind.

We waited in the dark until Benoit gave us the signal, and then it was go time.

The power cut had distracted Guard Alpha, and when he turned around as if he were going to check inside the residence, Shep shot off a tranquilizer, hitting him in the ass.

"Direct hit. Very nice," Benoit commented, but Lachlan growled through the mic and shut that up real fast.

It didn't take long for Alpha to stumble and fall to his knees, giving Shep the upper hand to knock him out cold with a punch to the jaw. Theo and I stepped over him and slipped inside the front door, guns raised and ready for any sign of movement.

It was pitch black inside, and from somewhere upstairs, I heard a guy yelling, "What the fuck happened to the lights?"

My pulse spiked at the realization that it was probably Rupert, which gave us a location on him—unless he decided to come down here and join us.

With no one to deal with immediately, I helped Shep bring the heavy guard into the house from off the porch while Theo kept watch, his gun trained on the stairs.

The lights came back on suddenly, just as a small thud coming from the back of the house caught my attention. Moments later, Lachlan appeared in

the foyer, which meant King had Guard Charlie and would be following the plan of tying him up and stripping him of weapons.

I looked around the space Rupert called home, every light in the place turned on like he was expecting company. Or had a house full of people. Maybe he had expected I would come, but he sure as fuck wouldn't be expecting my brothers.

As Shep began to bind Guard Alpha, he nodded at us to go on, and we started carefully up the stairs, Lachlan leading the way.

Kai had mentioned his room being on the second floor, and I knew there were no windows for entry that way. We'd have to bust through to wherever he was, and I hoped like hell that wasn't the same place as Rupert.

Guns at the ready, we quietly made our way to the second landing, heads on swivels.

We didn't know where Guard Bravo was, which meant it was likely he was up here somewhere. But that was Theo's problem. *I* was Rupert's.

"Stay alert, guys," Alessio said in our ears. "Hacked into the Wi-Fi, and it looks like you've got three more bodies on the second floor."

"No shit," I muttered.

"One seems more isolated than the other two. To your left at the far end of the hall. If I had to guess—"

"Kai."

"Right."

My instinct was to go to him and let Lachlan and Theo deal whatever they found to our right, but I didn't want to risk being jumped and losing the upper hand. We needed to apprehend the target—or annihilate it—*then* I could get Kai.

"You want me to take care of this?" Lachlan gestured to the cracked door to our right.

Yes, was my initial thought. But I wasn't letting Rupert get away tonight without my face being one of the last he saw.

"No. I need to do this. *Need* to be there."

Lachlan nodded and started toward the cracked door. We plastered ourselves to the wall behind him, and when he glanced back at Theo and gestured with his fingers to make his move, he confirmed that one of the two men in this room was Guard Bravo.

Theo shifted in front of Lachlan, then, silent as a ghost, slipped inside the room. There was a muffled shuffling through the door, and seconds later

a grunt before Theo's voice came through the mic.

"Bravo down. Safe to proceed."

Lachlan shook his head. "You all think *I'm* the danger. His Highness is fucking cutthroat."

I slid inside the room Theo had disappeared into seconds before, and on the floor at his feet was a man twice his size. He'd been garroted with a dull wire. Theo's favored weapon.

The one he was currently twirling like one might the tassel of a robe, and I frowned as I looked at the man a second time.

"Dead?"

"He was getting mouthy. Would've given us away."

Worked for me.

I scanned the room we found ourselves in—Rupert's bedroom. It was all outdated wood paneling and built-in shelves that could've been beautiful if the person living there had any taste. But when my gaze got to the enormous four-poster bed and gold silk sheets, bile rose in my throat.

I didn't want to imagine what might've taken place there, and I sure as fuck didn't want to believe that Kai had ever seen this room. When a sound from the opposite side of the room drew my attention, I decided to focus on that instead.

The door, to what I assumed was an en suite, was shut, and a sliver of light peeked out from under it.

This was it. He was mine now.

I glanced over my shoulder to see Lachlan helping Theo search Guard Bravo's body for weapons and ID.

"I'm going to take those ten minutes now," I told them, my voice unrecognizable even to myself.

"You want help?" Lachlan asked, but I'd already turned back on him and was making my way toward the bathroom.

On the other side of that door was the man who'd taken Kai. The one who'd kept him locked away from the world, the one who'd treated him like gum on the bottom of his shoe.

I hated him. I wanted to rip him apart for ever laying a hand on Kai. For making him feel worthless.

That man didn't deserve mercy.

With my gun trained on the door, I let every bit of rage flow through me, until the adrenaline was so intense that I kicked the bathroom door

open. It slammed back against the wall, causing Rupert to jump and whirl around to face me.

The sight of him only amped up my wrath. He wore nothing but a pair of boxers, his robe half open, but it was his face that set my teeth on edge. There was a scratch across his cheek that had drawn blood, and his nose was beginning to bruise, with caked blood around his nostrils.

The state of him was telling a story, and none of it was good. My stomach sank as I pieced it together: Rupert trying to force Kai—and Kai fighting back.

I struggled not to blow Rupert's goddamn brains out right then. My finger itched against the trigger, so close to ending it for this motherfucker.

But that would be too quick. And I wasn't going to let him off easy.

I wanted him to see me when he got what he deserved. I pushed the mask up beneath my hood.

The shock on Rupert's face morphed into anger, but when I took a step toward him, aiming my gun between his brows, fear flickered in his eyes.

"How did you get in here?" Of all the questions, that was what he went to first.

I moved aside long enough for him to see his fallen guard and my brothers behind me, and then took another step toward him. Rupert backed away, holding his hands up.

"What do you want?" he said. "Kai? Fine. Take him."

"Oh, I will." I didn't recognize the sound of my voice, too menacing for it to be mine. I took another step toward him, and his back hit the wall. Nowhere left to go.

"He's not fucking worth it. Just a good-for-nothing piece of—"

I didn't let him finish, striking him in the head with the handle of the gun. The force caused blood to spew from his mouth across the tiled floor, and he let out a muffled curse, then lifted his head and spat at me.

I shoved the gun in its holster and put both my hands around his neck, throwing him back against the wall and pinning him there with one arm. My fist made contact with his jaw, knocking it off its hinges with every repeated blow.

He struggled to put up a fight, but I didn't stop, never letting him get a hit in. His body went limp against the wall, and I let him fall to the ground. The robe fell open, and seeing him lying there in just those boxer briefs sent visions of him and Kai flashing through my head.

I crouched down, grabbed the back of the fucker's head, and hauled his flaccid body up off the ground as I reached for my gun and stuffed the barrel in his mouth.

Satisfaction roared through me at the fear that flashed in Rupert's eyes.

"You better not have fucking touched him," I seethed. "Or you're gonna *pray* I pull this trigger."

I released my hold and got to my feet, staring down at the pathetic piece of garbage cowering in the corner of his enormous en suite, and it didn't escape my notice that Rupert had pissed himself.

Good. I wanted the last few hours of his life to be miserable. I wanted him to understand how it felt to feel helpless. But more than anything, I wanted him to know I was the one who'd done this to him.

That he'd fucked with the wrong person.

"Luc?"

I turned to see Lachlan by the door, and I backed away from Rupert's crumpled body, ready to go in search of Kai. "Not here."

I didn't need to elaborate. Lachlan knew exactly what I was telling him. I hightailed it out of Rupert's room and made a beeline to where I knew Kai was being held.

When I reached the far end of the hall, I found a door in the same outdated wood as the rest of this relic, and all of the anger and adrenaline I'd felt moments ago resurfaced until I was kicking that fucker open with so much force that it almost flew right off its hinges.

Kai's eyes widened as he took a step back from whatever danger was coming for him through the door, but the second he realized it was me, he ran and launched himself into my arms.

"You came for me," he said, wrapping his arms and legs around me. "You found me."

His heart hammered against mine as he crushed me to him in a surprisingly powerful hug for someone so small.

"Always," I said, kissing his cheek and up to his ear. "I'd move heaven and earth to find you."

He started to shake and then sucked in a breath like I'd hurt him. His initial adrenaline rush was already wearing thin as whatever injuries Rupert had caused reared their ugly head.

I gently lowered him to his feet, and then I saw it. The terror he'd lived through, the pain. I'd missed it at first, my relief at seeing him again

blinding me. But his eyes were bloodshot, his cheeks wet from crying. I ran my gaze down over the clothes he'd put on that morning, searching for any injuries.

"What hurts?" I said, trying to control my fury.

Kai shook his head. "It's noth—"

"What hurts?" I said again, and Kai turned, lifting his shirt, showing me the red marks on his back. He'd either been thrown or pushed up against something. Then he showed me his arm, where bruises were forming in the shape of fingers. "Anywhere else?" Kai shook his head, and I smirked. "You hurt him worse."

A proud little smile tugged at the corner of Kai's mouth. "I did."

I reached for his chin and tipped his face up to mine. "Didn't need the knight in shining armor after all, did you?"

Kai's eyes shifted to the hood and mask, and then he moved up to his toes and brushed his lips over mine. "I'll always need him."

I grinned and took his lips in a fierce kiss full of relief, possession, and…love.

The emotion slammed into me with the force of a well-placed fist, but with no one in the sterile room except for me and Kai, there was no mistaking it.

I loved Kai.

Somewhere in the back of my mind I'd known I was falling. This beautiful boy had opened my eyes in ways no one ever had before. He'd shown me things no money in the world could ever show me, and when he'd been taken…

"Lucien?" Theo stood at the door looking at the two of us. "We've got to go."

I nodded, knowing this wasn't the time or place to tell Kai what I was feeling anyway. I put my mask and hood back in place, then took hold of his hand and led him out the door.

Everyone was gathered at the foot of the stairs in the foyer, every guard bound and gagged—except for the one Theo put out of his misery early—and my brothers waiting for Alessio to kill the lights again.

Kai took in the scene, and when his gaze landed on Rupert being held up by Lachlan, he smiled triumphantly.

"I told you he'd come for me," he said, squeezing my hand tight.

The one eye Rupert could still see out of narrowed to a slit, and he spat out the towel that had been stuffed in his mouth. “Fuck y—”

Lachlan slammed the butt of his gun across his face, making Rupert fall to his knees.

I nodded at him just before the room went dark. “He’s all yours.”

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LUCIEN

WITH GENTLE STROKES, I washed Kai's back with a soft cloth and soap, careful of the red marks there. Seeing them now made me want to bash Rupert's face in all over again, but I tried to force thoughts of him far out of my mind. He wasn't here with us, and he'd never hurt Kai again.

The water in my claw-foot tub lapped against my chest as I repositioned my legs on either side of Kai and sat forward to run the cloth down over his arms. His bruised arms.

"It doesn't hurt," he said, his head bowed forward as he relaxed into my touch. "I promise."

The fact that he was trying to reassure me when I could clearly see the marks that told me otherwise made my chest clench.

"I'm sorry, Kai." I swallowed and continued to wash every inch of him clean. "I'm so sorry I wasn't there."

"What? No. It was my fault I went out in the first place."

"Because you should've expected your ex to kidnap you?" I said, so pissed at myself for allowing any of this to happen. "This *is* my fault. I underestimated the lengths he would go to, and because of that, I put you in danger."

Kai turned around so fast that water sloshed over the edge of the tub. "Please don't do that. Don't take the blame for something *he* did."

Those innocent blue-grey eyes locked on to mine, but this time there was a steely determination in them. I ran the backs of my fingers along his

cheek and shook my head. “I promised to keep you safe. I failed.”

I’d never failed at anything. It wasn’t in my nature.

“Hey.” Kai grabbed my wrist, keeping my hand on his face. “You didn’t fail. I wouldn’t be here with you if you had. You promised you’d always be there for me and you were. You *are*.”

“But—”

Kai’s lips on mine cut off my protest.

“Dirty play, Mr. Daniels.”

“Seemed the most effective way to get through to you, since you weren’t *listening*.”

“Oh, I see.” And I did. The last thing he needed was to worry about my guilt, but it was difficult to just flip a switch and let it all go.

Rupert had had his hands on my boy. He’d taken him from me. And if I hadn’t gotten there in time…

Those soft lips were back on mine, Kai’s sweet tongue sweeping away any and all thoughts of Rupert as he slid a hand behind my neck and pulled me closer, diving deeper. The water gently lapped all around us.

“I’m going to do that every time you start thinking bad thoughts,” he said when he pulled away.

“And that’s supposed to deter me?”

“It’s supposed to distract you. I don’t want him here, between us. The only thing that got me through today was knowing I’d be back here in your arms. And guess what?”

“What?” I said, smoothing my hands up his back, massaging his neck.

“I was right.”

“You seem rather proud of that fact.”

“I am.” Kai grinned, but then his expression turned serious. “I’ve never had any reason to fight back before. Never had anyone to fight *for* before. But when he—who I refuse to name—tried to get in my head, tried to make me feel less than, I found a determination inside me I never knew I had. A *fight* inside me I never knew I had. You’d shown me what was possible, who I could be away from him, and I wasn’t going to let him take that away from me.”

A fire blazed in Kai’s eyes, and while I hated the reason for it, I was proud as hell to see it. The brave young man in my lap now was light-years from the skittish one who’d jumped every time I spoke to him, and I

couldn’t help but feel a sense of pride at how far he’d come. And suddenly, it felt important to tell him.

“I’m so proud of you too, Kai. When I saw the marks on—” He covered my mouth before I could say the fucker’s name and then lowered his hand. “Right. *Him*. I knew you’d fought back, that you refused to live that life anymore. To say that I’m proud is an understatement.”

He beamed and threw his arms around my neck. “I would’ve rather died than have him touch me again after you.”

Mine. That one word reverberated through my body, nothing ever feeling truer or more right. Kai was mine, and I was his, and there was nothing, and no one, that could ever break what we had.

“Yours,” Kai said into my neck, the word muffled.

I hadn’t even realized I’d said it out loud. I pressed a kiss to the top of his head, but Kai leaned back and stole one from my lips. His fingers toyed with the back of my hair, and he mistook the shiver that ran through me as being cold.

“We should dry off and get in the bed. What do you say?” he asked.

I arched a brow. “You giving orders now?”

“I am tonight.” He grinned, pressed another kiss to my lips, and stepped out of the tub. The bath sheet practically swallowed him whole as he wrapped himself up in it and then held another one open for me.

I’d let him do anything that made him happy, and if that meant letting him call the shots tonight, I was good with that. Kai was here. With me. That was all that mattered.

I rubbed my hands up and down his towel-covered body, getting him nice and dry, and all the while he smiled up at me, watching quietly.

When I’d finished drying myself off too, I tossed the towels aside and held my hand out. He laced his fingers through mine and I led him into my bedroom, hitting the lights on the way so the room went dark except for the flickering candles by the bedside.

I pulled the sheets back, and as Kai climbed in on the side he preferred and I slipped in behind him, the world finally righted itself. This was how I wanted to stay forever. With my beautiful boy in my arms, safe and happy and loved.

“I know I said I don’t want to talk about him, but I do have one question,” Kai said.

Here it comes. The moment he asked what had really happened to Rupert. Would he want to know? I wasn't going to hide it from him.

"Do you… Will the certificates be enough to put him away? Like, for good?"

The certificates were the least of Rupert's problems now, but I wasn't going to tell Kai that.

Instead, I kissed his shoulder and whispered by his ear, "Don't you worry about that. *He's* being taken care of. He'll never hurt anyone ever again."

Kai rolled over so he was facing me. "Good. I'd hate knowing he was still out there doing this to someone else."

"So would I." I gently stroked a piece of damp hair back from his forehead. "But we're not going to talk about him anymore. You're not going to worry about him. And we're *definitely* never going to think about him ever again. You're free. You can go anywhere. Do anything."

"Free…" Kai whispered as though tasting the word on his tongue, then scooted even closer to me, slipping his leg between mine. "What if…" He placed a hand over my heart. "What if I don't want to go anywhere?"

I wrapped my arms around him, and his head rested perfectly under my chin, his cheek against my chest. "Then you can stay exactly where you are."

"Good, because this right here is my new favorite place."

My heart thumped under the gentle press of his mouth, and as he snuggled against me and sighed, I closed my eyes, content just to hold him.

I wasn't sure how long we lay there, his breathing softly in rhythm with mine as I ran my fingers up and down his back. But as the day and night finally caught up with me, I started to finally relax now that all threats to us had been removed.

Sleep hovered at the edges, ready to claim me, and just as I was about to give in, I heard Kai whisper, "I love you."

My eyes flew open and my pulse began to race again.

Did he just say…?

I lifted his chin, and as Kai's eyes met mine, I could see the flare of surprise, like he hadn't expected me to be awake to hear those three words.

"Say that again."

He bit the inside of his cheek. "I love you, Lucien."

Everything I’d ever wanted was wrapped up in those words and the way Kai was looking at me now. It mirrored exactly what I’d been feeling but didn’t want to pressure him by saying, but now that the dam had burst, there was no holding back.

“My beautiful boy.” I cradled his face in my palm. “I love you. I love you for your strength and your bravery. I love you for your sweet spirit and the way you’re finding your joy. And Kai?”

Kai’s eyes began to shine with unshed tears, but the brightest smile curved his lips. “Yeah?”

“I love the way you love me. So fiercely.”

I kissed his palm, and he shut his eyes, unable to stop the tears that fell down his face. I kissed those away before capturing his lips, my heart full to bursting.

We stayed wrapped up in each other, the way it was always supposed to be, and when I felt his breathing begin to even out again, I kissed his temple.

“Sleep this day away. We have forever to wake up to.”

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KAI

4 months later

"REFRESH, REFRESH." I pulled down the page on my phone that would be posting the GED results sometime over the next few hours, but it remained frustratingly blank.

"I don't know what you're so worried about," Gina said, dipping a fry into her chocolate shake and then popping it into her mouth. "You know you passed."

I held my phone up. "I don't *know* that."

"You've been studying your ass off for months. Trust me, you passed."

Blowing out a breath, I set my phone aside and tried not to look at it for at least a minute. Maybe two if I could hold out. I grabbed a fry but bypassed Gina's preferred dipping sauce. I'd met her during an early GED prep class over the summer, and though she was three years younger than me, she was a great study partner. If *she* hadn't aced the tests, I'd be shocked.

My phone vibrated on the table, and my heart stopped for a second before I realized it was Lucien calling. That brought an instant smile to my face.

"Hey, beautiful," he said. "How'd the final test go?"

"I think pretty good. The results aren't posted yet, but fingers crossed."

"Gina too?"

I looked at her drawing hearts in the air with her fry and shook my head. “She made me celebrate with a tray of Wendy’s fries, so she’s got it for sure.”

“Ah. Think she’d mind my stealing you away?”

I perked up at that. “Really? I thought you were working tonight.”

“Change of plans. I’m out front.”

Whipping my head around, I saw Lucien leaned back against the black SUV that chauffeured him around town. He grinned and slid the phone into his pants pocket, and I was up out of my seat before the call ended.

“Sorry, Gina, gotta go.” I leaned down to give her a hug and then gestured to the rest of our study group still waiting for their orders. “You gonna be okay with the rest of these guys?”

She waved me off. “Go. Enjoy your sexy man. Celebrate.”

She didn’t have to tell me twice. Lucien was like a magnet drawing me toward him, and I still couldn’t believe he was mine. Dressed all in black, with his silk shirt undone a few buttons to reveal his tanned skin—I’d never seen anyone who took my breath away the way Lucien did. He was just so gorgeous. So *good*.

Mine—all mine.

As I walked toward him, he pushed off the car and met me halfway, hauling me up into his arms for a kiss that left me dizzy.

“Wow,” I said, threading my fingers into the back of his hair before diving in for seconds. “What did I do to deserve all this?”

A low rumble escaped his chest as he nipped at my lips. “I missed you.”

It was a good thing he had a hold of me, because the man made my knees weaker with every passing day.

We got into the car, and as it pulled into the evening traffic, Lucien twined his fingers with mine and pulled out his phone with his free hand. He tapped the screen, then held it up for me to see.

“Congratulations, Kai.”

I was about to ask what for when I realized what he was showing me. My profile on the test page, along with my final score for all the tests.

My jaw dropped. “I passed?”

“You didn’t just pass. You excelled.”

I looked between him and the score, and as the realization hit, so did the relief. I’d been studying so hard for months, and with that number, a huge

weight was lifted off my shoulders.

"I did it," I said, breaking into a huge grin. "How did you—"

"Alessio. But before you give me shit about asking him to hack it, just know he did that on his own. He didn't want you to be stressing all night about it, not when you should be enjoying yourself."

"Thank God." I wrapped my arms around Lucien's neck and held him tight. "I was going crazy. Tell him I said thank you."

"You can tell him yourself."

I leaned back, and Lucien's eyes swirled with mischief.

"You ready for a night out?"

"LEVEL EIGHTEEN?" I said as Lucien pushed a button in Libertine's elevator. "We've never been there before."

"No, we haven't." Lucien winked but gave me nothing else as the car whooshed up several flights uninterrupted, and when it dinged on the selected floor, I narrowed my eyes on the suspiciously quiet man beside me.

"Is this another one of your clubs?" I asked. "Let me see, if level five has mild or wild sides, is this an 'out of this world' level? Or maybe 'another stratosphere'?"

Lucien chuckled as the doors slid open, then took my hand. "We're going to have to discuss what you think *those* floors would entail later. But for now you're going to have to settle for something a little less intimate and whole lot more…inclusive."

I frowned as Lucien led me down a hallway to a set of double doors. When he pushed them open and a light flicked on, an enormous ballroom came into view, full of people cheering and clapping, his brothers included.

What the—

"Congratulations," everyone shouted as I stared at the group, completely overwhelmed. There was no way they were all here for me.

"I know, I know," Lucien said as he kissed my temple, "you didn't want to plan anything in case things didn't go your way, but I knew better."

I turned my head to look into his twinkling eyes. "Is that right?"

"You're my boy—of course I know what's best for you." His lips found mine, proclaiming loud and clear to everyone whom I belonged to, and that just made the cheering get even louder.

"Okay, you bunch of voyeurs," Lucien told them as he broke the kiss. "That's all you're going to get."

“Marshmallow,” Benoit said, aiming a smirk at Lucien, then he pulled me in and kissed both my cheeks. “*Bravo, mon cher.* We’re so proud of you. Especially this guy right here. Was pestering poor Alessio all afternoon for those results, he was.”

“Pestering? But I thought you just said—”

“Maybe I mentioned wanting the results early once or twice. Is that a crime?” Lucien asked.

“No, but what Alessio did—”

“Is like a drop in the ocean compared to other things he’s done.”

I couldn’t help but laugh at the good-natured banter between the two of them, loving how open Lucien was with his brothers about the two of us.

It was sexy as hell.

“Are you laughing at me?” he said, lacing our fingers together.

“No, I just… Well, maybe a little. Seems like you were stressed more than I was today.”

“I just wanted everything to be perfect for you.”

Benoit put a hand to his heart and sighed. “*Aimer, c’est trouver sa richesse hors de soi.*”

I smiled as I looked at the soft expression that had just crossed his face. “What does that mean?”

“It’s a French quote, *mon cher.* It means, ‘To love is to find one’s richness outside oneself.’ It’s clear Lucien has.”

Heat bloomed on my cheeks as I turned to look up at Lucien, and while it was clear to me how much he loved me, I hadn’t been sure anyone else could see. Apparently they could.

Lucien clapped Benoit on the arm and steered me around the over-the-top Frenchman. Benoit blew me a kiss and headed in the direction of the bar.

“Well done, Kai,” King said, shaking my hand. He was flanked by his significant others, East and Zac, whom I’d only briefly met before but who had proven to be unforgettable in that short interaction.

Zac nodded at me, a beer in one hand. “Have you made any plans now that you’ve graduated?”

“Uh, nothing set in stone,” I said, looking up at Lucien, who winked at me. “I didn’t want to get my hopes up and jinx it.”

“Well, if you need an in at Astor University, we could always help you,” East said, and then smirked. “For a fee, of course.”

King shook his head. “All of us are willing to help you in any way we can. Because that’s what we do—”

“At Libertine,” East finished, like he’d heard it a hundred times before. Then he let out an exaggerated sigh. “I can’t get my fun outside this place if you keep inviting everyone in.”

“Something the rest of us regret every time you open your mouth,” Alessio said as he joined the group. When East started to respond, King clapped a hand over his mouth, said goodbye, and led his guys back into the crowd.

“Who knew your talent was clearing a room?” Lucien asked Alessio, who shrugged unapologetically.

“East is a shit. Gotta keep him far away from your sweet thing.”

My brows shot up. “First you hacked my score early and now you’re calling me a sweet thing? Are you okay?”

Lucien laughed, and Alessio crossed his arms and glared down at me. He’d come around enough that I felt comfortable teasing him, though he was such a built guy maybe that wasn’t the smartest idea.

“Gets a diploma and suddenly he’s a smartass.”

“Nah,” I said. “Thank you for what you did. Really. I would’ve gorged on too many fries and had serious regrets tomorrow if it weren’t for your working your magic.”

“Speaking of working magic, you’re welcome for these.” Theo shouldered his way past Alessio, with Shep right behind, both of them double-fisting drinks. He thrust one into Lucien’s hand while Shep handed me a purple one topped with what looked like glitter.

“It’s a mocktail,” he said with a wink. “And congratulations.”

I was flattered that he remembered I didn’t drink, since I hadn’t been around him much with all the traveling he did.

I lifted the glass to my lips, but Theo put his hand on my arm, halting me.

“Does everyone have a drink?” he called out, his voice rising over the chatter in the room. “Lachlan, Cooper doesn’t count as a beverage.”

Lachlan flipped him off and continued his make-out session with Cooper off in the corner.

“No accounting for class,” Theo said before holding his glass toward me. “Kai, on behalf of all of us, we’d like to congratulate you and celebrate your big night. You know, when I met you just a few short months ago, you

had all this pent-up desire to go out into the world and see it all. Do it all. So now, with this as just the first of your many accomplishments, I want to help make that happen."

He handed me a square envelope with both my and Lucien's full names in perfect calligraphy on the front.

"You didn't have to give me anything," I protested, but Lucien took my drink to free my hands.

I flipped it over and carefully broke the wax seal. My mouth fell open. "Is this…"

Lucien looked over my shoulder. "An invitation to the royal wedding?"

"Indeed," Theo said before tossing back the rest of his drink.

"This isn't a gift for Kai," Lucien said. "This is a gift for *you*."

Theo brushed his hand over his shirt and shrugged. "What can I say? The more, the merrier."

"Bullshit," someone coughed, and I looked over my shoulder to see Lachlan steering Cooper toward us. "More like the more buffers you can bring, the better."

"Does the why of it all matter? It's a gift," Theo said, and held his empty glass in my direction. "*Your* gift."

"I'd love to go," I said, sliding the invitation back into the envelope. "Monaco's amazing, and I've never been to a wedding before."

Lucien took the invitation from me, set it aside, and then reached for my hand. "We'll think about it, how's that?" he said.

"You can't turn down royalty," Theo replied.

"We can if The Veil's grand opening happens to be that weekend."

Theo's eyes narrowed. "Don't you dare. I know for a fact it won't be ready by then."

With a chuckle, Lucien drew me to his side. "We'll see about that, won't we? Now, if you all don't mind, I'd like a moment alone with the graduate."

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LUCIEN

"JUST WHEN I thought *your* place had the best view in the city," Kai said as we stepped out onto the balcony high above Manhattan. It was officially fall, and there was a crisp chill in the air that signaled the start of my favorite time of year.

"*Our* place," I corrected him.

Kai turned to face me and leaned back against the balustrade. "Ours, huh? You plan on keeping me a little while longer?"

"You know better than that." I caged him in, and he moved up on his tiptoes and lifted his chin, angling for a kiss. I swept my tongue inside for the taste of him I'd needed all day.

He hummed against my mouth, the sound he made when he was his happiest, most contented self. That sound was one I lived for. I had told Kai I wanted to bring a smile to his face every day, and now I'd added that sweet hum to the list too.

"I can't believe you did all this for me," he said, and then shook his head. "Actually, I *can* believe it, because this is the kind of thing you do. I just don't know what I did to deserve it."

"You don't have to do anything to deserve our celebrating you." I took hold of his hand again and led him over to one of the moon-shaped wicker porch swings we'd had installed for night gazing. "If you need a list, though, let's start from the beginning. For the fact that you're here in this world. That's reason enough for me to honor you every day of your life."

Kai tried biting back a smile, but it broke free anyway as we settled onto the cushions. He curled up beside me, half in my lap as I wrapped my arm around him. “Thank you,” he said.

“Oh, I wasn’t done.” I counted off on my fingers. “It’s for passing your GED. For surviving when the odds were against you. For bravely trying new things.” When I went to add another finger, Kai chuckled and grabbed my hand, holding it in his lap.

“Okay, okay.” He kissed the tip of my nose. “You’ve made your point.”

“Not even close.”

Kai rested his head on my shoulder and looked up at the sky. With the city lights never sleeping, it was hard to enjoy the stars in the same way we had in Monaco, but it was still beautiful in its own way.

“I don’t think I can point out Cassiopeia tonight,” Kai said. “Guess we’ll have to go to that royal wedding after all.”

I chuckled. “We don’t need an excuse for another visit.”

Kai snuggled into me, resting his cheek against chest as he so often did, fitting in my arms as though he were made just for me.

In fact, I was starting to believe that that was just the case. Just as I knew deep down in my soul I’d been made for him.

For years I’d been searching. I’d been to every exotic place on the planet and never seemed to find what I was looking for. Not like I felt right here looking at him. Something I wanted to do for the rest of my life.

“Kai?”

“Hmm?” His fingers flexed where they rested on my shirt like a content kitten, and I couldn’t help but stroke a hand over his soft hair.

“While tonight was to celebrate all those things I mentioned earlier, there’s something else.”

“Lucien, you’ve already done too much.”

“By now you should know the words ‘too much’ don’t exist in my vocabulary.” I reached under the side of the cushion, where I’d hidden away a small, wrapped box. Kai sat up, taking the gift when I handed it to him.

“What’s this?”

I nodded for him to open it, feeling an odd flutter in my stomach, nervous for the first time in my entire life.

Kai slid his fingers beneath the wrapping, so careful in the way he opened it, and when he lifted the top, his breath caught, his eyes full of wonder.

“Lucien… This is…” He gently traced his finger over the smooth gold bracelet that was nestled inside. “This is exquisite.”

“So are you.”

“You’re spoiling me.”

“No.” I ran my fingers down his jaw then tipped his face up. “I’m loving you.” I nodded to the box. “Why don’t you take it out, try it on?”

Kai bit into his lip and nodded, carefully pulling the bracelet free. He held it up to get a closer look, and when he saw the inscription engraved inside, he sucked in a breath.

My Beautiful Boy, Always.

I studied him closely, my heart in my throat as I tried to gauge his reaction. He was either going to want this or—

The love shining in his eyes as they turned glassy told me all I needed to know.

He swallowed as he ran his finger over the engraving again. “Is this your version of a collar? Are you…claiming me?”

“Do you remember that painting in my office?” I reached for the bracelet and gently took it from him. “I once told you that a collar is a symbol of a dom’s ownership, his love.” I unclasped the piece of jewelry. “But I don’t want to own you, Kai. I want us to belong to one another.”

Kai nodded and held his arm out, and I fastened the bracelet around his delicate wrist.

“This is so the world knows you’re mine,” I said, then took his hand and brought it to my lips. I kissed his fingertips then drew them down to my shirt. “And this”—I slipped them under the material, over my heart—“is how you know I’m yours.”

I unbuttoned my shirt and parted it, and Kai saw the tattoo I’d recently acquired for the first time. I’d made sure to keep him blindfolded or in the dark whenever we’d been together of late to keep my surprise.

“Oh my God.” He pulled his hand back, but I drew it to me again, using his finger to trace the Perseus constellation and his name, both now permanently inked into my skin. “That’s beautiful.”

“I’m glad you think so, because the person it represents is the most beautiful I’ve ever met. Inside and out. My beautiful boy.”

Kai licked his lips as he continued to trace the pattern, and it was a ritual I knew I’d never get sick of.

“I love you,” he whispered. “So much I sometimes wonder how I ever survived without knowing that.”

I cradled his cheek, wiping away a tear that had fallen. “Maybe you survived *because* you knew it was out there somewhere waiting for you.”

“Fate?”

“Hope. Another reason I love you so much. After everything you’ve been through, you still held out hope for more. You never gave up.”

“I never could’ve dreamed you up, though.” He put his hand over mine where it rested on his face. “I didn’t think men like you existed. I still don’t. It’s just you.”

“You say that even after seeing the way I wield a whip?” I teased.

“Oh, *especially* after that.” He smiled and looked back down at the tattoo, lightly brushing his fingers over it. “How’d I get so lucky?”

“We both did,” I said, remembering the first time I’d been struck by Kai. “From the minute I saw you in the club, I knew you by heart. It only made sense that I keep you right there, forever.”

“My knight in shining armor.”

“I thought you didn’t believe in those.”

“Hmm, I seem to remember a very charming man telling me that he’d work on changing my mind.”

“Oh? And did he?”

“He did. But I don’t need him to save me anymore. I just want him to love me.”

I leaned down and captured his lips, my heart as full as it had ever been as we sat beneath the stars. It was miles away from the first night we’d done this, and yet our burgeoning feelings from that time had only grown and intensified to this very moment.

A moment I would remember for the rest of our lives.

“I promise I’ll show the world I’m yours forever,” I said, pulling Kai back into my arms, where he belonged. “And you’ll know I’ve got you under my skin.”

“Always?”

“And forever.”

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THANK YOU

Thank you for reading
DEVILISH (Park Avenue Kings #2)

We hope you swooned as hard as we did over Lucien & Kai's story. They are so perfect for each other, and we fell more and more in love with them as their love unfolded before our very eyes

Up next, our IMMORAL King.
The only question is...
Who will we find when *his* hood is removed?

IMMORAL
Park Avenue Kings #3

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We are loving every second of this new world where our kings work behind the scenes to get everything their hearts desire, and we can’t wait to bring you each and every one of their stories.

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Co-Authored with Brooke Blaine

Aced

Locked

Wedlocked

Fallen Angel Series

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Halo

Viper

Angel

An Affair In Paris

Lust. Hate. Love

Elite Series

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Danger Zone

Need For Speed

Classified

Dare To Try Series

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Dare You

Dare Me

Truth Or Dare

Malvagio Series

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Forbidden Mafia Prince

Sinful Mafia Prince

Park Avenue Princes

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Infamous Park Avenue Prince

Insatiable Park Avenue Prince

Scandalous Park Avenue Prince

Possessive Park Avenue Prince

Salacious Park Avenue Prince

Notorious Park Avenue Prince

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Sex Addict

Shiver

Secrets & Lies

Wrapped Up in You

All I Want for Christmas…Is My Sister's Boyfriend

Jingle Bell Rock

Once Upon A Sexy Scrooge

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ALSO BY BROOKE BLAINE

South Haven Series

A Little Bit Like Love

A Little Bit Like Desire

The Unforgettable Duet

Forget Me Not

Remember Me When

Hate to Love You Series

Bedhead

L.A. Liaisons Series

Licked

Hooker

P.I.T.A.

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ABOUT ELLA FRANK

Ella Frank is the *USA Today* Bestselling Author of the *Temptation series,* including Try, Take, and Trust and is the co-author of the fan-favorite *Fallen Angel series.* Her *Prime Time series* has been praised as “highly entertaining!” and “sexy as hell!”

A life-long fan of the romance genre, Ella is best known for her steamy, heartfelt, M/M romances.

If you’d like to join Ella & Brooke’s Patreon for a look behind the scenes, to read chapters early, to get ARCs first, this is the place right here!

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You can also find them in their Facebook Group

The Naughty Umbrella
(Facebook Group)

And if you would like to talk with other readers who love Ella’s character’s from her Chicagoverse, you can find them **HERE** at
Ella Frank’s Temptation Series Facebook Group.

Want to stay up to date with all things Ella?
You can sign up here to join her newsletter and get a FREE ebook.

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ABOUT BROOKE BLAINE

Brooke Blaine is a USA Today Bestselling Author best known for writing romantic comedy and M/M romance. Her novels lead with humor and heart, but Brooke never shies away from throwing in something extra naughty that will scandalize her conservative Southern family for life (bless their hearts).

She's a choc-o-holic, lives for eighties bands (which means she thinks guyliner is totally underrated), believes it's always wine o'clock, and lives with the coolest cat on the planet—her Ragdoll/Maine Coon mix, Jackson Agador Spartacus.

Brooke's Links
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